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# Language's "bliss of unfolding" in and through history, autobiography and myth: The poetry of Rita Dove

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LANGUAGE'S "BLISS OF UNFOLDING" IN AND THROUGH HISTORY,  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MYTH: THE POETRY OF RITA DOVE

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

December, 1999



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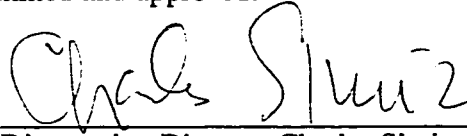
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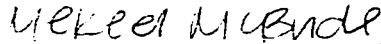
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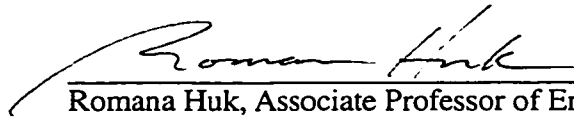
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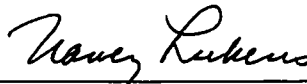
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**For Berenice Sibley Reed**

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## ABSTRACT

### LANGUAGE'S "BLISS OF UNFOLDING" IN AND THROUGH HISTORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND MYTH: THE POETRY OF RITA DOVE

by

Carol Keyes

University of New Hampshire, December, 1999

This dissertation focuses on the first five books of poetry published by the American poet Rita Dove: *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980), *Museum* (1983), *Thomas and Beulah* (1986; awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987), *Grace Notes* (1989), and *Mother Love* (1995). It situates her work within the whole field of American poetic discourse. Dove's relationship to myriad strands of American *ars poetica* traditions arises out of patterns of amplification and negotiation worked out in Dove's poetry in relation to a wide range of such traditions. Thus, the study's methodology proceeds from the poet T.S. Eliot's dictum that poets' writing on poetry—their *ars poetica* statement in prose—have “a special and permanent value for *readers*” of poetry. The primary sources of the study, beyond Dove's work itself and her interviews and prose writings on poetry, are the poetry and *ars poetica* prose writings of other American poets (past and present) as well as other poets, such as Eliot, and the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Because Dove is black and female, much has been made of her position within African-American and American women's poetic traditions. Attention is paid to this phenomenon, and to the scholarship done in those fields, as well as in American poetry generally. More attention is paid the formal poetic practices enacted in the poems of this poet who proclaims, “Language is everything,” and says that it is the “bliss of unfolding” in and through language that engages her most as poet. This study also explores how Dove's following the bliss of unfolding enacts exploration of three central themes present throughout all of her books—history, autobiography, and myth. The inextricable enmeshment of questions of poetry's

proper functions and imperatives socially and culturally, and of its aesthetic and formal properties, in Dove's poetry, is a time-honored, solidly American *ars poetica*, first expressed in the early American poets Bradstreet and Whitman. The conclusion of the dissertation is that Rita Dove—who herself proclaims time and again her resistance to categorization as other than poet in her relationship to her work—is a quintessential American poet.

## INTRODUCTION

...[I]t is precisely this address to *writers* that gives Pound's criticism a special and permanent value for *readers*. One learns from him appreciation of literature by learning to understand the preparation, study and training, to which the writer should submit himself.

T.S. Eliot, "Introduction," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 1935

The only genuine wellspring of literature is life, life, with all its complexities and contradictions. And the rendering of life into art has to be seamless; it can't suffer the imposition of 'doing what's right' or anticipating how something will be construed. Of course, the critics come in later and start affixing their labels.

Rita Dove, 1996

I'm in favor of nothing that walls out knowledge in the name of purity. There is no way to keep yourself "pure," be it race-specific, gender-specific, or caste specific.

Rita Dove, 1993

Labels only keep us from specificity. There are camps. But I can't put myself in one. I hope I can't.

Rita Dove, 1999

The 1987 winner of the Pulitzer Prize for her third book of poetry, *Thomas & Beulah*, Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995,<sup>1</sup> Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia and associate editor of the journal of African-American literary studies *Callaloo*, Rita Dove has published six single volumes of poetry. Her first, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, was published in 1980; her last, *On the Bus with Rosa Parks*, in 1999.<sup>2</sup> Her *Selected Poems* appeared in 1993 and is comprised of her

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<sup>1</sup> Dove is the youngest poet to receive this honor. She is usually characterized as the first African American to be named U.S. Poet Laureate, and in fact, she is the first to occupy the position as so titled. However, as she herself notes in an interview, this is a matter of semantics: "a mere technicality." Both Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks were appointed as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, Hayden in 1976, Brooks in 1985. Dove says they occupied "the same position" as she, that "just...the name has been changed" (Hammer & Daub 31).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, she has published a collection of short stories, *Fifth Sunday* (1985), a novel, *Through the Ivory Gate* (1992), a verse play, *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994), and *the poet's world* (1995), comprised of her two Laureate lectures and an autobiographical essay. Her various essays and articles, a one-

first three books *en toto*. This study focuses on her first five books, ending with *Mother Love*, published in 1995,<sup>3</sup> and considers Rita Dove's position within, and relationship to, American poetic discourse.

Ever since the earliest American poets (for whom we have extant texts) began writing, they have concerned themselves with the questions poets of all Western traditions have—what is the nature of poetry: what does it represent; what are the formal elements central to its expression; what is its relationship to society and culture, and so on. (Plato is the first on record within Western poetic to consider these questions, in Book X of his *The Republic*.) For American poets, the questions of social and cultural imperatives appears inextricably mixed with the questions of aesthetic and formal properties inherent in or proper to poetry. For early American poets, the relationship between national identity and poetry was particularly key, a relationship also involving the entanglement of aesthetic and cultural concerns. Before nationhood, in the seventeenth century, Anne Bradstreet, an early arrival from “Mother England,” proclaimed her poetry “[t]his mean and unrefined ore of mine,” and acknowledged the new ground upon which she wrote as a female and an American, without “father” and of “mother... poor.”<sup>4</sup> A century post-nationhood, in the nineteenth century, Walt Whitman writes to Ralph Waldo Emerson of “the United States too... founding a literature.” He proclaims that “America is to be kept coarse and broad”; “[a]uthorities, poems, models, laws, names, imported to America, are useful to America today to destroy them, and so move disencumbered to great works, great days”; “[w]hat is to be done is to withdraw from precedents.” Those precedents come by way of England

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act play, and poems not included in any of her books, appear in various magazines and journals, such as *The Georgia Review*, *Time*, *The New Yorker*, and *Callaloo*, to name a few. Her poetry is widely anthologized also.

<sup>3</sup> Her latest book of poetry is not included in this study because it came out as the study was being completed.

<sup>4</sup> “The Prologue” and “The Author to Her Book” Gilbert and Gubar (1985) 63 and 67 respectively.



(and thus are informed by other European as well as ancient Greek precedents, wellspring of Western poetry and poetics) for the relatively new American nation. Whitman acknowledges these precedents: “all the rich repertoire of traditions, poems, histories, metaphysics, plays, classics, translations,” which for him (as for the late twentieth century Dove) constitute “magnificent preparations” for their overthrow (and reappropriation for many American poets) in the making of “our own” “plainly signified literature”—“electric” and “lusty” in its expression—which will “give the modern meanings of things, to grow up beautiful, lasting, commensurate with America.”<sup>5</sup> In Whitman’s exchange with Emerson (he is responding to a letter from Emerson) one reads the entangled criss-crossing conversation among American poets, within their poetry, essays, and correspondences with one another that continues to this day. It is this conversation, in its various forms, I term American poetic discourse and of which I speak when I say this study’s purpose is to consider Rita Dove’s position within American poetic discourse. Dove herself characterizes her work as participating in “the grand conversation” of “an extended family of writers past, present and future.”<sup>6</sup>

In the twentieth century, the discourse is now of course multitudinous and multiplicitous in its voices and its subjects, with a far richer vein of American voices and subjects to mine than Bradstreet or Whitman had available to them. As the poet Yusef Komunyakaa says about American poetry today:

The strength of American poetry relies upon a many-sided quest and system of aesthetics. There isn’t *one* taste; it is a reflection of Whitman’s democratic vision, embracing a rough grandeur. In any pluralistic system, however, one expects differences and disagreements. We can now envision Ezra Pound beside Amiri Baraka and H.D. flanking Toi Derricotte, Joy Harjo back-to-back with Frank O’Hara and Garrett Hongo alongside William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens—a continuum of impulses and possibilities that creates a map that is a challenge. Sometimes the voices are connected through their differences, unable to be cleaved because of this

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<sup>5</sup> Allen and Talmann 4, 6, .7, 6, and 4 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Bellin 32.

industry of language that defines poetry. We are often a chorus of diversions and chance connections... still pulled by the need to create.<sup>7</sup>

While any American poet's work can be read as a composite of certain poetic traditions coming before her as well as those being put into practice contemporaneously, as is in part Komunyakaa's assertion and observation here, this study explores Rita Dove's relationship to various strands of Western *ars poetica* traditions because her poetry exhibits a highly aware crafting in relationship to an impressive range of poets and traditions. At the same time that contemporary poets are themselves historically and culturally informed in their own work by their own specific and particular complex of historical and cultural positions, they are likewise informed by the centuries-old discourse of *ars poetica*, of what poetry is, what it should be, what it does, what it should do—formally, thematically, socially and culturally. All contemporary poets join a long line of earlier American and a few centuries of British poets in that discourse first taken up by Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century B.C., at the start of the Western tradition of poetry as we conceive and understand it as Americans in the late twentieth century. Dove's poetry proclaims its position within the whole of Western poetic traditions, from Plato and the Greek lyric poets on. This study honors one of Dove's stated *ars poeticas*—resistance to categorization—the “affixing labels” she acknowledges “the critics [will bring] in later.” (*Ars poetica* is what I term the position a poet takes in relationship to any specific element of poetry, whether expression of that position is in the poetry itself or in other statements on poetry.) Her poetry enacts the amplification of myriad strands of poetic discourse in her particular contributions to American poetic discourse. It simultaneously enacts a positioning within the discourse that continuously moves away from categorization as anything other than, or less than, American poetry.

In this era in American history when the “politics of identity” dominates many arenas of national discourse, including the poetic and the academic, because Rita Dove is

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<sup>7</sup> Hass, et. al. 22.

female, and African-American,<sup>8</sup> the subject of her work invariably raises questions regarding its characteristics in relationship to, and position within, African-American and female poetic traditions. There is a tendency in much criticism today to organize a poet's work around elements in the poetry that seem identifiable, from our particular position as readers, as representative of that poet's social group's poetry, its traditions, its characteristics, its variations from other social groups' traditions. Dove's interviewers frequently question her regarding the relationship between her gender and race identities and her poetry. In response, Dove repeatedly asserts her own sense of writing identity as dominantly poet *sans* identity adjectives, even as she acknowledges the significance of the female and African-American strands of identity informing her poetry. Her poetry has a perspective informed by female African-American experience (among other informing elements) and often as its subject female African-American experience. She herself has said, "... as a writer I just happen to be a Black and a woman and those perceptions may appear on the page more often than not because those are the viewpoints I'm most intimate with, and so I filter my intentions, my subject matter, through them" (Taleb-Khyar 358).

In a 1989 interview with Helen Vendler, she addresses Vendler's question of "to what extent your work comes out of [the] sociological grids [of black, American, contemporary writer]," and of what meaning any of these labels had for her, in this way:

First and foremost is just the language that is my clay and my primary interest. ...But I am also positive that the fact that I am a woman, that I am black, that I am an American, and that I'm living in the time that I'm living in now has an enormous impact on my writing. And probably not only on the content, but certainly on the way it's presented or what I feel impelled to write about. For instance, the fact that, when I was growing up, I could not find anything written about what it was like to grow up as a black woman,

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<sup>8</sup> Dove is also of Cherokee and Blackfoot descent (Taleb-Khyar 355), the Cherokee both from her father's and mother's sides of the family. In Dove's Poet Laureate address, "stepping out: the poet in the world," she mentions her father's "Cherokee blood" (20). Her maternal grandmother is the title female character in *Thomas and Beulah*. In the first poem in Beulah's section of the book, "Taking in Wash," Beulah's mother says that it's "[the] Cherokee in him" that causes the skin color change in Beulah's father in the winter, "cold drawing/the yellow out" (47). [I need to note that Dove says it's not strictly the facts that inform that volume's poetry.]

or woman-child, was important—I wanted to read that book, so I try to write those poems....In terms of labels, though, in terms of what I want to be called—I want to be called a poet. I’m also a black poet. I’m a woman poet. (488)

Asked about his sense of his own identity in an interview in the same year, Allen Ginsberg, after listing at length the “myriad labels, myriad identities” that might come to mind in his case (such as gay, Jewish, Columbia alumnus, American, New Yorker, “planetarian,” etc.), comes to the same assertion as Dove: “There’s no need to fixate on any single one, except the one you are working with the most, so I would say ‘poet’” (Lannan Literary Series, 1989). Dove’s reason for choosing the poet label for her identity seems closely related to Ginsberg’s. In both instances, the poets are being interviewed because they are poets and because of the qualities and quality of their work. Yes, she’s black, and she’s female, but it’s the poetry that determines her identity in the context of her interview with Vendler; that determines her dominant identity whenever poetry is the subject. Dove has spoken about the “cubbyholing” of “a black writer... expected to write a certain way,” which she experienced when she first began publishing her poetry: “Editors and reviewers would ask—What is this poem about?—meaning this poem doesn’t sound black” (Walsh 144). Dove is one of the contemporary American poets whose work promotes the erasure of such narrow delineations and expectations regarding African-American poetry, and regarding poetry generally.

Two years after her Vendler interview, in a *Callaloo* interview with Mohamed B. Taleb-Khyar, Dove responds to a question regarding “feminine discourse” in a move once again from the question of sociological identity to that of poetry’s formal and conceptual compositional processes:

Well, politically I consider myself a feminist, but when I walk into my room to write, I don’t think of myself in political terms. I approach that piece of paper or the computer screen to search for—I know it sounds corny—truth and beauty through language. Writing... is *always a struggle between words and rhythm and concepts and topics and characters*. ...as a writer I just happen to be a Black and a woman and those perceptions may appear on the page more often than not because those are the viewpoints I’m most intimate with, and so I filter my intentions, my subject matter, through them. ...I’m interested in the truth. (358, my emphasis)

In Louise Gluck's introduction as editor of *The Best American Poetry 1993*, she discusses the "truth" of poetry also, and links it to poetic process in much the same way Dove does.

She says:

Art's truth is as different from sincerity's honest disclosure as it is different from the truth we get in the doctor's office, (that sequence of knowns which the doctor, newly trained to respect the patients' dignity, makes wholly available, affording, in the process, glimpses into a world of probabilities and strategies, the world of action transposed to conditions in which action can do only so much.) The poem may embody perception so luminous it seems truth, but what keeps it alive is not fixed discovery but the means to discovery; what keeps it alive is intelligence. (93)

For both poets, the enactments of poetry are dynamic evasions of stasis, that which represents the death of the poem. Poetic energy fueling the poet writing produces the poem most successful at keeping itself enlivened. The language of the poem harbors within its form the life of "the means to discovery." When asked by Steven Schneider if what attracts her most about writing poetry is the "bliss of writing," Dove replies "No." She continues ("after some hesitation" according to Schneider):

It isn't the bliss of writing but the bliss of unfolding. ...There's an edge [in poetry] that needs to be explored, the edge between being unconscious and then suddenly so aware that the skin tingles. Let me be more precise. There is that moment in the writing of a poem when things start to come together, coalesce into a discovery. This is sheer bliss.... (122)

The exploration of how Dove's "bliss of unfolding" enacts itself in her poetry is one aim of this study.

"Language is everything,"<sup>9</sup> Dove tells Stan Sanvel Rubin. Poets are in love with language, the word, and the world, and for each poet that world is particular to her or him. One of the aims of the lyric poet has always been the imitation, representation, approximation, what you will, of the music of the spheres, (sublime a la Longinus or rude a la Whitman as two varying views of that music), as the poet experiences it. Fidelity to that experience and to working its act and form into language is one of the projects the poet

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<sup>9</sup> Rubin and Ingersoll 327.

takes on. In this regard, Dove is like all poets. This study has as one of its goals the close exploration of Dove's uses of language, in an attempt to discover precisely what Dove means when she says, "Language is everything," to discover how the aesthetic and formal concerns she explores in language inform and entangle with the various themes and subjects of her poetry.

This study aligns itself with Eliot's assertion that poets writing about poetry to other poets provide "a special and permanent value for *readers*." In reading Dove's poetry I give primacy to Dove's statements about poetry in essays, reviews, and interviews, and the *ars poetica* essays of other poets, as well as their poetry since any poem can be read as a field of references to poetry. Critical, theoretical, or scholarly work germane to the focus on Dove's relationship to Western poetic tradition will also provide source material for the study's reading of her poetry. Each chapter will focus on one book of Dove's poetry, progressing chronologically from *Yellow House* in chapter one through *Mother Love* in chapter five. Dove's first book, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, establishes the poetic concerns—her subjects, her themes, her conversation with all of Western poetic tradition—she will continue to explore and amplify throughout her following four books. In each successive book Dove returns to a deepening and amplifying enactment of one of the several central concerns first given expression in Dove's earliest collection. But, "first and foremost," to quote Dove, she returns to the uses of language. In *Yellow House*, she discovers:

...Sometimes

a word is found so right it trembles at the slightest explanation.  
You start out with one thing, end  
up with another, and nothing's  
like it used to be, not even the future.

When she gets to *Mother Love*, she finds (luckily for her readers):

no story's ever finished; it just goes  
on, unnoticed in the dark that's all  
around us: blazed stones, the ground closed.

To begin reading Rita Dove's poetry in *Yellow House* is to begin following Dove following "the bliss" of language "unfolding" through its (and her) never finished, Americanly "many-sided" quest.

## CHAPTER I

### *THE YELLOW HOUSE ON THE CORNER*

The best of the historian is subject to the poet.

—Sir Philip Sidney, “An Apology for Poetry,” 1595

Always waiting untold in the souls of the armies of common people, is stuff better than anything that can possibly appear in the leadership of the same.

...Such character is the brain and spine to all, including literature, including poems.

—Walt Whitman, “Walt Whitman to Ralph Waldo Emerson,” 1856

In 1986, when Rita Dove’s first two volumes of poetry, *The Yellow House on the Corner* and *Museum*, were already out, and *Thomas and Beulah* was about to be published, Arnold Rampersad took up the question of her position within African-American poetic discourse, characterizing Rita Dove’s work as an emergent sign of renaissance in African-American poetry. Certainly the publication in 1980 of *The Yellow House on the Corner* heralded a strong voice emerging to speak--to sing--its part not only within African-American poetic discourse, but within all of American poetic discourse. Describing her as “perhaps the most disciplined and technically accomplished [African-American poet] since Gwendolyn Brooks began [publishing her poetry] in the late forties (53), Rampersad speaks tellingly, (and presciently, as Dove’s next three volumes of poetry, *Thomas and Beulah* later that year, *Grace Notes* in 1989, and *Mother Love* in 1995, were to prove), to one of the central *ars poetica* elements in Dove’s poetic opus—the concern for “technical,” formal poetic issues. Simultaneously, he identifies her value as an “historical poet” (54); one who documents “black experience, but mainly in the course of ‘ordinary’ things” (55); one whose poetry concerns itself with “a continuity of human experience” (59) that links diverse human experiences, the ordinary and the extraordinary, the historical and the Historical; and one whose approach involves an “appropriate



solicitude for [poetry's] tradition and future." (54). These assertions seem even truer today with five more volumes of Dove's poetry having been published. They were all appropriate commentary on her first book, *Yellow House*, which explores a wide range of *ars poetica* practices and positions, each of which Dove returns to in each of her next four books in further development and amplification.

Dove herself characterizes her first book as a "hodgepodge of techniques and visions."<sup>1</sup> Daphne Marlatt has observed that contemporary women poets' work is characterized by the "feeling of listening" to other women writers and that this "feeling of listening, the intensity with which they listen and leap, leap into themselves, is met by, creates the intensity of listening in the reader."<sup>2</sup> In this "hodgepodge" first book, Dove's work not only reflects the feeling of listening to other women writers, but also of listening to various strands of African-American and American literary and poetic traditions that precede and are contemporaneous with her work. This characteristic is sounded in the book through various formal poetic practices and pronouncements regarding Dove's vision of her poetic mandates.

Dove's poetry hears and finds congruency in one of Audre Lorde's *ars poetica* assertions. In her essay, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Lorde speaks of the power of language to effect change in personal, social, cultural, and political arenas, which she sees as inextricably interrelated. She says:

...poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walsh, "Isn't Reality Magic?" 150. Dove acknowledges this quality as characteristic of "many first books," going on to say the poems in the book "evolved over an extended period of time as I learned to write and use my voice."

<sup>2</sup> "Re-Belle at the Writing Table" 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Sister Outsider* 37.

Lorde's essay focuses on women as poets and as poetry readers. And while Lorde's poetry itself focuses directly on black female experience far more often than Dove's, Lorde would apply this pronouncement to all people, not just women. Dove certainly agrees with such interrelationship between poetry and life. She concurs regarding the transformative potential in poetry. Dove acknowledges that "the political can radically change our personal lives," but also that "the personal is ultimately what is most important to us."<sup>4</sup> She believes in poetry's potential to effect cultural, social, or political changes. (Ekaterini Georgoudaki remarks about this aspect of Dove's poetry: "although she deals with the problems of racism and sexism, she does not adopt the polemical voice of either a black nationalist or a feminist poet."<sup>5</sup>) She eschews writing a poem with such changes as the goal. That she leaves to her role as poetry advocate in the public sphere. Dove tells Lloyd in response to a question about being "expected to trade your individuality to become the 'spokespoet' for a larger group":

As a poet, the pressure is there but I will not take it on—that is, to use my poetry as a mouthpiece for political concerns. The reason why is that I believe one can fool oneself when trying to wrench purpose from the art—the art turns out bad. I always feel it, even when I'm writing, that someone will say, "What are you Doing writing about cellos—you should be writing about black women. But I would be dishonest if I were to ignore certain aspects of my humanity in favor of others—in favor of the politically correct ones—because I would be skewing the entire person. Part of my

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<sup>4</sup> Lloyd 1.

<sup>5</sup> "Crossing Boundaries" 420. I take issue with Georgoudaki's assumption that the voice of the black nationalist or feminist poet is usually polemical. Dove would not define herself as a black nationalist, but she frequently asserts her identity as a feminist—feminist or black nationalist is not necessarily equal to polemical. In her interview with Taleb-Khyar, Dove decries the reduction of feminism to polemics, making a distinction between "true feminists" and "loud-spoken fanatics" (359). (I see a danger in the designation "true feminists," ("I'm one, you're not," or the reverse depending upon one's analytical position on gender), but Dove speaks here in an interview, not an essay or a poem, and does go on to elucidate the difference somewhat: "fanatics" are "extremists" of simplification; "true feminists" go for complexity and nuance.) It's a curious phenomenon that some critics and scholars, in trying to articulate what is distinctive about Dove's work in the arenas of race and gender, resort to this reductionist attitude, especially since Dove's work is committed to avoiding such. Here's Helen Vendler in 1994 about some of Dove's poetry in *Yellow House*: "She is not afraid to transgress, in choosing to use a male surrogate, the usual feminist laws of political correctness" ("Identity Markers" 383). One wonders, which is the feminist book of laws that states a female writer cannot or should not take on a male persona or subject.

political/personal mandate is to represent life in all of its complexities, in its fullness.<sup>6</sup>

Here in *Yellow House*, as in her next four books of poetry, Dove writes poems that illuminate the tremendous range of complexities of her own position as an American poet who is black and female.

Dove's poetry hears and finds in Don L. Lee's Black Arts poetic dictums a rigidity she resists. She addresses him (now Haki R. Madhubuti, meaning "Precise Justice" in English),<sup>7</sup> poetic forefather, in "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream" (16). She decries the lack of complexity of his *ars poetica* stance regarding African-American poetry--his proscription to *Think Black*, the title of his first book (published in 1967, just a few years before Dove decided to try becoming a writer and switched from a pre-law to English major). In the poem, priestess-like figures—" [w]omen in robes" who "chant, stamping their feet in wooden cadences" from among "the black trees"—"stretch their beaded arms" to the figure of Don L. Lee, "[a]lways moving in the yellow half-shadows," as he approaches the speaker in the poem. Seemingly cast by the black trees amongst which the chanting and singing women stand, the "yellow half-shadows" suggest that Lee himself, unlike the female figures, resides in a place not completely black according to his own definition of blackness and despite his poetic dictum against Euro-American poetic constructs. (This is a dictum Dove would of course resist since already in her first book she embraces classical music influences<sup>8</sup> and by the time she gets to *Mother Love* in 1995 she is embracing the sonnet form handed down in English from the British Renaissance writers.) Lee begins to speak: "'Seven years ago...,'" and is cut off by the speaker in a reply that dismisses the suitability of his vision for the speaker and the priestess figures:

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<sup>6</sup> "Navigating the Personal" 1.

<sup>7</sup> Cook, "The Black Arts Poets" 690.

<sup>8</sup> Those influences are most obviously present in the poems "Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins With Affliction" (10) and the six-part "A Suite for Augustus" (25-30).

““Those years are gone—/What is there now?.” He begins crying. This appears to be a direct anti-resonance to Lee’s poem, “Don’t Cry, Scream,”<sup>9</sup> which derides blacks who “were too busy getting/into debt, expressing humanity &/taking off color.” Dove’s poem transfers the taking off of color from Lee’s objects of castigation in his poem to Lee himself in hers, where he “always” moves “in the yellow half-shadows.”

The poem ends with the complete and grotesque degeneration of Lee. “[H]is eyeballs/Burst into flame”—he is rendered unseeing, his vision destroyed; “caviar [is]/Imbedded like buckshot between his teeth”—he becomes a caricature of those “busy getting into debt,” an expensive delicacy of the wealthy classes stuck between his teeth like a weapon, in his mouth, site of poetic speech; “[h]is hair falls out in clumps of burned-out wire”—he has become so spent a spokesman for black people that his hair, a physical characteristic of his own blackness, falls from his body. At the end of the poem, the speaker lies back in the grass, “chuckling” at this figure rendered impotent, who is crying “[t]ears of iodine” that will not heal his wounds, his “fists clenched” against the priestess figures who no longer attempt to reach him, and the “singers float away,/Rustling on brown paper wings.” As Georgoudaki notes, these images convey “the decay of the ideology that Don Lee embodies” (420). They also convey Dove’s strong antipathy for the heavily proscriptive nature of that ideology and its presence and pressure for her as a black American poet beginning to publish during a period when his *ars poetica* had much authoritative power. In Alicia Ostriker’s 1977 essay, “The Nerves of a Midwife: Contemporary American Women’s Poetry,” she identifies four elements common to the poetry of women writing in the seventies. One of those elements is “the release of anger” (312), often scripted as a “fantasy of vengeance” (321), and directed most often at a male figure. Readers of Dove’s poetry need read no interviews with her to discover that she

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<sup>9</sup> Cook 692-3.

takes a stance against coercive dictums as regards the forms or subjects appropriate to poetry, no matter from what quarter they issue.

In Dove's fourth volume of poetry, *Grace Notes*, the poem "Ars Poetica" (48) provides a useful illustration of Dove's position regarding the appropriate subjects for poetry, a position enacted in all of the poems in *Yellow House*. In a 1990 *Women's Review of Books* review of three poets' work, among them *Grace Notes*, Jan Clausen expresses some reservations about Dove's stated *ars poetica* in the poem. Eliding the eighties altogether (when Dove's first four books were published, including *Grace Notes* in 1989), Clausen has set her review in the context of an introductory, retrospective look at the state of American women's poetry in the late sixties & early seventies, and asserts that "[i]n 1990, women's poetry makes more modest claims for itself and the future" (12). In my mind, the very book by Dove that Clausen reviews counters this assertion. The importance Clausen gives to historical context, I do too. The three books of poetry Dove wrote before *Grace Notes* was published in 1989—*Yellow House*, *Museum*, and *Thomas and Beulah*—and *Grace Notes* read as next in the line of Dove's poetic development, counter this assertion of modesty of claims in American women's poetry in 1990; and Clausen's further claim of the modesty of Rita Dove's poem "Ars Poetica."

Clausen finds troublesome Dove's lines in the poem, "What I want is this poem to be small/a ghost town/on the larger map of wills" (*GN* 48)), and considers them a modest *ars poetica* utterance. "And yet. And yet," to quote Clausen herself (13) as she begins to describe what troubles her about *Grace Notes*, I am troubled by the notion that there's any trouble at all in Dove choosing that small ghost town for the realm of poetic art. To name the small as the site of poetic material is not necessarily to make a small or modest claim for poetry. There *is* something "out there" where "the unknown but terribly/important essayist" in the poem finds "nothing." Dove believes that which is "...not recognized for its true

essence does not exist.”<sup>10</sup> In a way, her poem anticipates Clausen’s critique and asserts itself against it. The “unknown but terribly/important essayist” character of the poem cannot recognize the ghost town’s “true essence” and thus it “does not exist” for him—“...he came running,/crying Jesus—there’s nothing out there.” Just as there are “a billion stories [comprising] history with a small *h*” that Dove sees as “the infinitely more interesting” subjects for her poetry than “History with a capital *H*, ...a construct, a grid you have to fit over the significant events in ordinary lives,”<sup>11</sup> so this poem prefers the “small,” the “ghost town/on the larger map of wills”; prefers the circling in “as a hawk:/a traveling x-marks-the-spot”; believes there is something out there, that is this ghost town, that does not exist without this poem to recognize it, to mark its spot dynamically (“a traveling x-marks-the-spot” hawk). A ghost town is the empty repository of history and myth; no one lives there anymore to witness the town’s stories. Dove the poet wants to be that hawk (the bird whose name enters our vernacular to denote sharpness and precision of sight: hawk-eyed) hovering and circling over that ghost town, seeking “the representation of clear vision” Arnold Rampersad characterizes as a formal impulse in Dove’s poetry.<sup>12</sup>

In “O” (71), the last poem in *Yellow House* (which predates *Grace Notes* by almost a decade), and one Dove has identified as another of her *ars poetica* poems, “[o]ne word... has changed the whole neighborhood.” The process is, simply put in the last two lines of the poem, “[y]ou start out with one thing, end/up with another, and nothing’s/like it used to be, not even the future.” That’s a rather grand aspiration for poetry, no small claim at all. You might even show someone, perhaps that essayist in “Ars Poetica,” what scanning the

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<sup>10</sup> “Either I’m Nobody, or I’m a Nation” 56.

<sup>11</sup> In a 1995 interview with Steven Bellin in *Mississippi Review*, Dove says that in her poetry, “trying to fit my own history, and the history of my race and gender, into the Grand Chronicle—History with a capital *H*—led me to the realization that the underside of History, as it were, was infinitely more interesting. So in my work I make a conscious effort to treat History (a construct, a grid you have to fit over the significant events in ordinary lives) and history (consist[ing] of a billion stories) equally” (18-19).

<sup>12</sup> “The Poems of Rita Dove” 57.

landscape like “a hawk:/a traveling x-marks-the-spot” reveals, that it’s not true that “there’s nothing out there.” As “a hawk:/a traveling x-mark-the spot,” you might even write a Pulitzer Prize-winning volume of poetry illustrating Akron (the location of the poems in *Thomas and Beulah*) is “a ghost town/on the larger map of wills” of American poetic subjects. Dove has said about being a poet, becoming a poet:

One of the things that fascinated me when I was growing up was the way language was put together, and how words could lead you into a new place. I think one reason I became primarily a poet rather than a fiction writer is that though I am interested in stories, I am profoundly fascinated by the ways in which language can change your perceptions. (Taleb-Khyar 350)

A concern for the poetic principles of form does not occur in the poet of modest claims. Even an overview consideration of Dove’s poems in *Yellow House* reveals an impressive range of subjects and formal strategies. Poems on love, lust, history, family, foreign travel, poetry itself; some replete with dream-like or mythic images, others with quotidian images and happenings; some employing both; some told from the perspective of a distant, omniscient observer; some from the deeply felt individual perspective of the speaker—these constitute the poems in this book and provide illustration of the “hodgepodge” of techniques and visions.

In Helen Vendler’s reading of the book’s slave narrative poems, she characterizes them as involving one of the classic approaches in African-American poetry: “attempts to school [one’s self]<sup>13</sup> in black historical memory.”<sup>14</sup> Even more, it seems to me, the poems (which constitute the second of the five sections *Yellow House* is divided into) are attempts to school readers in American history, in a particular era in American history that has been documented Historically primarily from a position of white American subjectivity. They

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<sup>13</sup> And the reader of course. Here’s Dove in her 1989 interview with Steven Schneider: “An active reader longs to be pulled into another’s world and to comprehend that world, to get into another’s skin utterly and yet understand what’s happening at the same time. That’s an immensely exciting thing. And that’s what I work for” (123).

<sup>14</sup> “Identity Markers” 382.

attempt to fill in some of the missing Historical and historical voices of black American experience during that era. Dove's method in those poems is to link, and ultimately to conflate, the ordinary and extraordinary, historical and Historical experience. For Dove, "the personal versus the political... is one of the basic questions of our time," and "they blend into one another,"<sup>15</sup> echoing that political cultural mantra of the late sixties and early seventies (the time when she was coming of age and beginning to write and publish poetry), "the personal is the political." One of the most obvious examples of how this becomes so in her poetry is in her various slave narrative poems. In each of these poems the personal experience of the slave stands as and becomes political critique of slavery while the poems remain firmly centered in the details of the individual slave's experiences within the institution of slavery. Charles Simic says, "the poetry of direct experience distrusts tradition, both in philosophy and in religion, by insisting on the perpetual newness of the world and the sanctity of the individual as the sole repository of the authentic."<sup>16</sup> Dove's poetry is indeed poetry of direct individual experience. (One might well say about Dove's poetry that it also distrusts proscriptive poetic traditions (and discourses), as "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In A Dream" and "Ars Poetica" assert.).

In "The Abduction" (36), Dove details the free born American black Solomon Northrup's capture in Washington, D.C. (where he had been lured from his home in New York State by a touring musician job offer from his captors)<sup>17</sup> during President William Harrison's funeral in 1841. The poem begins with an exultant Northrup, marveling at the pomp and circumstance of the ninth President's funeral procession and his place, as a free man, in the panoply of Americans represented in D.C. the day of the funeral:

The bells, the cannons, the houses black with crepe,

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<sup>15</sup> "Navigating the Personal" 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Orphan Factory* 36.

<sup>17</sup> New York state law emancipated black slaves in 1827.



all for the great Harrison! The citizenry of Washington  
clotted the avenue—I among them, Solomon Northrup  
from Saratoga Springs, free papers in my pocket, violin  
under arm, my new friends Brown and Hamilton by my side.

Of his “new friends Brown and Hamilton,” Northrup asks, “Why should I have doubted them?” Paid well by them (“[t]he wages were good”), he works side by side with Brown and Hamilton in their traveling circus tent show:

While Brown’s tall hat collected pennies at the tent flap  
Hamilton’s feet did a jig on a tightrope,  
pigs squealed invisibly from the bleachers and I fiddled.

The vivid evocation of a free black man’s engagement in the fine world of freedom—“free papers in ...pocket” in the “clotted” streets of President Harrison’s funeral procession; the vivid jumble of sounds and sights of this man’s work—the “tall hat collect[ing] pennies,” the “jig on a tightrope,” the pigs squealing,” the fiddling—these elements in the poem precede the dark end when Northrup wakes from the trauma of his gunshot wounds: “I woke and found myself alone, in darkness and in chains.”

The first line of the poem moves forward on a sequence of alliterative *b*’s and *c*’s into the larger Historical world of the poem, into the second line where the sentence ends with an exuberant exclamation point: “all for the great Harrison!”. We find among this great community of national mourning clotting the streets of the nation’s capital, Solomon Northrup, Historical and historical individual, a free black man during the slavery era, and a man with “violin/under arm”<sup>18</sup> in the midst of drinking in the heraldry he, as one of the free “citizenry of Washington,” can roam freely through, “free papers in ...pocket,” proof and talisman (neither function able to keep him free). In the fifth and last line of the first stanza, he’s walking with his “new friends Brown and Hamilton.” The slant rhymes,

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<sup>18</sup> Rampersad sees certain of the figures, in *Yellow House* as “fellow black writers.” Northrup is one of them. Given Dove’s concentrated preoccupation with language and the formal processes of poetry, I too immediately read Northrup’s violin as a figure itself to be associated with creativity, the making of music—and to the formal processes of poetry, which also concern themselves with the making of music. Vendler also sees Northrup as connected to Dove through his violin in relationship to Dove’s own musicianship as a cello, bass viol (which she plays as part of an early music consort) and viola da gamba player.

assonances, and alliterations in such connective plenitude in the first four lines preceding this one die down as Brown and Hamilton, Northrup's betrayers, complete the image of unity and heraldry in which the poem centers Solomon Northrup, with the phrase "I among them" centered in the center line of the stanza.

In her poetics essay, "Poetry, Prophecy, and Survival," Denise Levertov asserts that "the deepest listening, the ear of imagination, rejects all that merely says, that fails to *sing* in some way,"<sup>19</sup> harkening back to what she had to say in a mid-sixties interview—"a poet, a verbal kind of person, is constantly talking to himself, inside of himself, constantly approximating and evaluating and trying to grasp his experience in words. ...At their best sound and words are *song*, not speech" (my emphasis).<sup>20</sup> This statement echoes Dove's *ars poetica* assertion that poetry is the "search for—I know it sounds corny—truth and beauty through language, ...[through the] struggle between words and rhythm and concepts and topics and characters,"<sup>21</sup> and Dove's description of herself in *Mother Love's* foreword, as the "poet...struggling to *sing* in [her] chains" (my emphasis xi-xii). Dove's struggle in language in "The Abduction," that struggle "between words and rhythm and concepts and topics and characters" yields most fittingly the song of Northrup's own struggle in chains. It is a song in which Dove provides witness to direct black individual experience of the American slavery system, to how within that experience the personal and the political, the personal and the Historical, "blend into one another." It is a song in which the "words and rhythm and concepts and topics and characters" also blend into one another.

The subtle undercurrent of imperfect rhyme schemes progressively diminishing as the poem moves forward accompanies the progressively diminishing length of the stanzas

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<sup>19</sup> *New and Selected Essays* 148.

<sup>20</sup> "Line-breaks, Stanza-spaces, and the Inner Voice" *The Poet in the World* 24.

<sup>21</sup> Taleb-Khyar 358.

in the poem. From the first five line stanza in which Northrup is free and a historical one-among-the-throngs of mourning Historical “citizenry of Washington,” “The Abduction” moves through the three succeeding stanzas which are progressively reduced by one line in length. The poem shrinks around Northrup structurally as the space in the poem given to Northrup’s experience of freedom increasingly diminishes in each stanza through the fifth and final one line stanza where Northrup wakes, regains consciousness,” alone, in darkness and in chains.” In this image set off “alone,” in its one line stanza, History and the history of the individual conjoin in a terrible, dark image—the darkness of History chaining the individual, “alone, in darkness.” “History with a capital *H*,” and the small cap history of direct individual experience intertwine. “Whereas History is a chart of decisions & alternatives, history is like larding the roast: you stick in a little garlic and add some fat, and the meat tastes better” (19), Dove tells Steven Bellin. In poetry, stick in—add to History—direct individual experience. The poem sings more beautifully, with more authenticity.

In a poem such as “The Abduction,” Dove listens to the English Renaissance poet Sir Philip Sidney and finds both congruency and divergence. In his 1595 essay, “An Apology for Poetry,” Sidney argues the moral and thus social and cultural value of poetry—“to teach and delight,” and goes on to assert that “the best of the historian is subject to the poet.”<sup>22</sup> Teach history’s truth in poetry; delight with poetry. For Sidney it is Dove’s “History with a capital *H*” that poetry is to teach. For Dove the best of History is subject to the individual’s experience of history, in divergence from and amplification of this particular strand of Sidney’s *ars poetica*. Robert McDowell has characterized this position as “unerringly combin[ing] private and public political history” (399). For a poet for whom the small moments of “small ...nobodies”<sup>23</sup> are the essential material of poetry,

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<sup>22</sup>Kaplan 114 and 122 respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Rubin and Ingersoll 236.

there exists the question of the balance of the Historical and the personal experience that occurs within an Historical era. "The Abduction" is one representation of that balance, a representation as much formal as thematic or conceptual. (When Dove comes to write *Thomas and Beulah*, she devotes a whole book to exploration of that balance.)

At the moment of Northrup's capture he recalls:  
the windows rattled with each report  
Then the wine, like a pink lake, tipped.  
I was lifted—the sky swivelled, clicked into place.

At that moment, the poem tips, lifts and swivels, delivering Northrup "in darkness and in chains" in a descent that allows "no ladders in that sleep" upon which Northrup could make his way back to freedom and the exhilaration of participation in American citizenry.

Other formal patterns and relationships move the reader through the experience of the poem. In the third stanza, when the crisis of the poem begins to emerge, it is signaled formally in the first line's alliterative pattern of *r*'s that contrasts with the alternation of alliteration Dove patterns in the first line of the first stanza, which stanza evokes the larger historical setting of a seeming unity of national spirit that is undermined in the third stanza by the attack on Northrup set up by his newly made "friends." As the poem progresses, each stanza takes the reader further into the experience of the individual within History, moving from the large Historical image of the nation's capitol in mourning in the first, to that of Northrup's tent show site of employ with its hubbub of activity and noise in the second, into the third stanza where Northrup alone at home is fired upon as his captors move in on him, through to the last two stanzas—the penultimate where the poem evokes Northrup's passing out from his gunshot wounds, and the final where he is the historical individual caught in the web of pre-Civil War History. The apparent national unity of the first stanza is finally revealed to have been mere pageantry as a freedman, Solomon Northrup, is once again enslaved. As much as the narrative and images of the poem themselves, the way in which Dove has used language has moved the reader through History and its underside of actual individual reality.

Denise Levertov says one of poetry's functions is to "provide words of *witness*," in the Old Testament sense of prophecy as witness (versus prediction).<sup>24</sup> This is Dove's accomplishment in this section of the book, focusing on a particular era of American History that has not been witnessed adequately from the subjectivities of those enslaved. In "Someone's Blood" (40), the speaker watches her mother depart on a boat going further downriver on the Mississippi to a life in which contact between mother and daughter will be severed, most likely forever. In "The House Slave" (33), the poem provides witness once more of slavery's impact on the family of the enslaved. A girl, the house slave of the title, wakes to the sound of the "first horn" calling to the field slaves to work, and hears "the whip curl[ing] across the backs of the laggards—/sometimes my sister's voice, unmistakable, among them." The ordinary, historical experiences explored in such poems become the individual's ordinary experiences of History—as brutalities and daily indignities that rupture the family structures, (as well as individuals and communities). The poems provide trenchant critiques of History through Dove's insistence upon what Charles Simic calls the "sanctity of the individual as the sole repository of the authentic"—the authentic of Historical experience as historical experience in Dove's case. They bring into History the history of the "nobodies." In an interview with Steven Schneider, Dove speaks of the kind of witnessing she wishes her poetry to involve: "I do believe that an experience inarticulated will be lost; part of my task as a writer, one of the things I take on and want to do, is to articulate those moments so they won't be lost" (123).

While Dove is not a poet to be identified as one of the inheritors of the objectivist school in American poetry, in his 1950 "A Statement for Poetry," Louis Zukofsky's makes an assertion that appears as a point on an *ars poetica* time line coming down to Dove in the late twentieth century: "[i]f read properly, good poetry does not argue its attitudes or beliefs; it exists independently of the reader's preference for one kind of 'subject' or

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<sup>24</sup> "Poetry, Prophecy, and Survival" 147.

another.”<sup>25</sup> In the early nineties, Dove says, “As an artist, I shun political considerations and racial or gender partiality; ....I would find it a breach of my integrity as a writer to create a character for didactic or propaganda purposes...” (Taleb-Khyar 358). Just as emphatically as Dove, as poet, rejects the focus and stress on her race and gender identities over her poet identity in terms of significance and value, so too she rejects a poetic party line, of which she is keenly aware, regarding her own poetic mandate. In her interview with Emily Lloyd, she goes on from her commentary about the pressures to be a “spokespoet,” to say:

...if I’m writing a poem in which I notice a flower, if I felt it was important to talk about this flower, I would be dishonest not to do it just because I thought it wasn’t directly about being black and a woman. Besides, how do I know it ISN’T about being black or a woman? (1)

Asserting her agency, resisting the proscription and prescription that being black and female still entails, Dove will choose her own subjects and strategies. She will choose a cello, a flower, conflict between American blacks (as she does in both “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream” (16) and “The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi” (37)), as subjects; she will affirm her desire to write that “small” poem, that “ghost town/on the larger map of wills.” Some of the political cultural power of Dove’s work resides in its resistance to political conformities (which generally involve generalizing, didactic, and propagandistic expression) often expected of those like her, those seen to speak for a particular social and political group, as Dove realizes she is.

Articulating various kinds of moments so that they will not be lost in history, and so that they might take their place in national consciousness, Dove has a poetic commitment that requires writing poems such as “The Transport of Slaves From Maryland to Mississippi” (37-8) and “Kentucky, 1833” (45) so that the witness her poetry provides encompasses takes on as many historical strands as available to her. “Kentucky, 1833”

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<sup>25</sup> Allen and Talmann 143.

presents, in three prose stanzas, the Sunday, “day of roughhousing,” social gathering and activities of slaves, in the woods, on the grounds of the plantation on which they live and work. The poem presages a representation of black-white American race relations that Dove develops in her later books, particularly in *Thomas and Beulah* and *Grace Notes: American* whites have a place in the world of American blacks because of their social, political, and cultural hegemony in the nation at large, but it is a relational, not a central or dominant place. When the black individuals in Dove’s poems encounter whites, whites are not the subject.<sup>26</sup>

Even when History tells us that through slavery whites had legal and material control over blacks, Dove tells us in a poem such as “Kentucky, 1833,” that whites, in this case, “Massa and his gentlemen friends,” are “on the edge” of this Sunday of roughhousing. Dove does not ignore the circumscription and marginalization that American slavery forced upon blacks. In this poem, she does not ignore the role the white master plays in determining the stage upon which black slave experience expresses itself. It’s Massa that has “let [them] out in the woods” for the day. However, the elusive “something” that “hangs in the air, a hallelujah, a skitter of brass,” that the slaves “can’t call... by name” so “it disappears,” is wholly and solely the experience of the slaves themselves, in its richness and its loss. Perhaps it is this richness that brings Massa and his “gentlemen friends” to the woods.

Acknowledging the limits slavery imposes upon slaves (and on white masters, since Massa and his white friends can only participate in the experience of the poem “on the edge” despite the white master being the agent whose rule deems the day off from slave

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, in a number of poems, Dove’s subject is a white person, or someone of indeterminate race. In *Yellow House*, for example, there are “Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins with Affliction” (10) where the subject is a famous dead white man; “The Bird Frau” (9) and “The Son” (69), which focus on families of German descent; the “Adolescence” series of poems, which, if one does not know the poet’s racial identity and her penchant for bringing autobiographical material into her poetry, one would not be able to determine the race of the individual subject, except perhaps in the first of the series of three, in which someone’s face is described as “pale as a pecan” (48).

work), Dove nonetheless articulates details of pleasure, of buoyant and serene energies, that allow the amplification of the name “slave” from its traditionally scripted realm of oppression and wretchedness in the shadow of enforced white supremacy into a realm that includes moments of pleasurable community activity and agency. The slaves in “Kentucky, 1833” are bound by their condition of slavery, yet their slavery does not preclude experiences of pleasure or affirmation.

On Sundays, “[t]he women, brown and glossy, gather round the banjo player, or simply lie in the sun, legs and aprons folded”; “[t]he young boys wrestle and butt their heads together like sheep—a circle forms; claps and shouts fill the air”; and “...the winner is sprawled out under a tree and the sun, that weary tambourine, hesitates at the rim of the sky’s green light.” Dove documents some of the more well-known travesties of slavery in such poems as “The House Slave,” where the poem witnesses the physical violence of slavery, in “Someone’s Blood,” where the poem witnesses the severing of familial contact between mother and child, in “Pamela” (39), where an escaped slave en route north following the North Star sees her white hunters approaching, “smiling, rifles crossed on their chests.” Here she evokes the less concrete travesties of slavery. Each of the three prose stanzas in the poem ends with a statement or suggestion of something not available, something beyond the limits of what’s possible for those enslaved. In the first, it’s the something “in the air” that can not be “call[ed] by name” and so it “disappears,” which is directly preceded by the information that “old woman Acker” is “the only one who could read to us from the Bible, before Massa forbade it.” In the second, it’s that the winner of the boxing match “gets a dram of whiskey if he can drink it all in one swig without choking,” suggesting that even the winner, because a slave, must pass yet another test in order to claim the winner’s reward. In the third, it’s “the book that, if we could read, would change our lives.”



In “stepping out: the poet in the world,” one of her Poet Laureate essays in *the poet’s world*,<sup>27</sup> Dove devotes a section, “house and yard,” to the significance of those spaces, and others, in poetry, in our American lives, in her poetry. Discussing this century’s Jim Crow institutions, she reminds her audience that “[i]n the skewed order of racial privilege, a black person’s ‘proper place’ used to be the back—of the bus, the movie theater, and the house” (30). In “Kentucky, 1833” it’s the back of the plantation, “out in the woods.” Dove goes on to say that “[i]f a particular segment of society has been confined to a discriminatory domain, its members will strive to get out of it or in some way transform their surroundings” (31). She quotes Gaston Bachelard: “...[t]he houses that were lost forever continue to live on in us” (15). For slaves, house as home had been lost forever, de facto, via the institution of slavery. Sundays roughhousing in the woods represents an act of transformation, even more so an act of creation, a claiming of space unto their own, even if as limited in time and space as the Massa’s decree ordains. —Even if that claiming’s import is only momentarily felt, as “a hallelujah, a skitter of brass” that can’t be named, because it can not be established long enough for its name to be called. Dove will return to a far more extensive exploration of the enactment and claiming of imaginative space throughout the Beulah poems in *Thomas and Beulah*.

Dove speaks and writes frequently about the importance of the reading experience for her, as a child, and in her work now as a writer. She tells William Walsh that what she hopes to do in her writing “is reach out from the other side of the reading experience,” recalling how, as a child, when she read, “the whole world... dropped away, ... the author and I... meeting on the very page in my hands” (151). The enforced illiteracy of slaves was of course one of the conditions crucial to slavery’s maintenance and survival. In “Kentucky, 1833,” reading becomes a metaphor for the immediate world of slavery

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<sup>27</sup> The essays, published by the Library of Congress in 1995, are transcripts of lectures Dove gave at the Library in 1994.

dropping away: “It’s a crazy feeling that carries through the night; as if the sky were an omen we could not understand, the book that, if we could read, would change our lives.”

“Kentucky, 1833” is the only prose poem in all of Dove’s books of poetry.<sup>28</sup> The opposition between prose and poetry forms that the prose poem takes on appears perfectly suited here to the struggle in language Dove is so keenly involved in, that struggle here between concepts of black slave subjectivity and of black enslavement during American slavery. As Mary Ann Caws notes, the prose poem, “[w]ith its oxymoronic title,” is as its formal level “based on contradiction.”<sup>29</sup> Dove tells her readers over and over again to pay attention to her struggle in language. This poem illustrates the yield available to readers in doing so. Why this is a prose poem rests inextricably in Dove’s attempt to convey the paradox of individuals living as slaves. Of course their lives are richer and more affirmative than tales of oppression can ever convey; of course their lives are circumscribed in essentially damaging ways by the institution of slavery. In Adrienne Rich’s essay, “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet,” she discusses the power in poetry of its music and its “concrete, sensuously compelling images” as the site of her first engagement with poetry, (aligning herself with Dove, among many other poets, in a love of what language creates), and her subsequent realization that poetry “was also revelation, information, a kind of teaching.”<sup>30</sup> The kind of witnessing as revelation à la Levertov that Dove does in her poetry and in this specific poem is also the kind of witnessing that provides information and instruction à la Rich. Dove reaches back into history to name, for contemporary Americans and all the slaves gone into history unnamed individually, the disappearing “hallelujah” and “skitter of brass” that couldn’t be called by name in Kentucky

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<sup>28</sup> “Pamela,” in the same section of *Yellow House*, is a three stanza poem in which the second is a prose stanza.

<sup>29</sup> Preminger and Brogan 977.

<sup>30</sup> 169.

in 1833 by those slaves gathered in the woods; to name “the sky’s green light” and the “crazy feeling that carries through the night” that would have “change[d] ...lives,” if those slaves could have read the omen of the sky overhead.

Other forms of witnessing occur in other poems throughout *Yellow House*. In an essay that became part of her book on five contemporary black women poets, Dove among them, Ekaterini Georgoudaki notes the “retrospective and reconstructive method”<sup>31</sup> common to many contemporary American women poets, such as Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and Dove. (Georgoudaki echoes Rich herself in her early seventies essay on American women’s writing at the time, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” in which Rich speaks of “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes,” in order to “see and name—and therefore live—afresh.”)<sup>32</sup> In Dove’s case, retrospection and reconstruction involve witnessing personal experience. Dove discusses this impulse in her own work and her work’s witnessing function when she tells Vendler she tries to write “those poems” she wanted to read but could not find when she was growing up, poems “about what it was like to grow up as a black woman, or woman-child.” In *Yellow House*, she has written some of such poems of witness (found throughout all five of her books of poetry) in her series of three “Adolescence” poems.

All three of the poems focus on early adolescence, that liminal state between childhood and full adolescence, when the erotic power of a girl’s sexuality becomes for her an ever more focused presence. A decade and a half later in *Mother Love*, the theme of female adolescence continues to absorb Dove, as she takes on the subject of the daughter’s separation from the mother and full entry into womanhood and active sexuality out of late adolescence. In these poems in *Yellow House*, incipient adolescent dramas of sexual awakenings and awareness occur within a smaller and far more domestic space than the

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<sup>31</sup> “Crossing Boundaries” 421.

<sup>32</sup> *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 35.

cosmopolitan environs of Paris, where most of the poems in *Mother Love* are situated. All three poems take place at night or, in “Adolescence—III,” as night falls through most of the poem. Both “Adolescence—I” and “III” take place in the backyard, “IIP” in a backyard and bedroom with a view of the backyard garden. “Adolescence II” takes place in a bathroom. Sexuality’s domain is of course the night; backyards are one of the domains of childhood; bedrooms and bathrooms are sites of privacy and intimacy.

Risk and danger play their part in these lyric explorations of adolescent female sexual agency, identity, curiosity, and desire. So too does the power of each poem’s subject, girls in early adolescence, awake to and aware of stirrings that open them to erotic experience. Parents believe it is safe to let a child out into the backyard, especially at night, and of course it usually is, but every child knows a richness of small thrills and dangers from backyard experiences. In “Adolescence—I” (48), girls gather, kneeling in the grass behind a grandmother’s porch, on a humid night, as one of them, Linda, reveals the thrill of erotic knowledge the others do not yet know from experience—“A boy’s lips are soft,/As soft as baby’s skin,” in the lines that end the first sentence of poem. The full sibilance so evocative of sensuality in this pronouncement has been built to in the preceding four lines with a plethora of *s* sounds: possessive *s*’s, plurals, words such as “grasses,” “whispered,” “wise.”

The next line is the only one-sentence line of this one stanza poem and with the two preceding lines comprises the center of the poem, four lines coming before it, four after. It marks the beginning of the speaker’s experience after Linda’s pronouncement, which experience begins to take over the poem: “The air closed over her words.” The line closes the poem momentarily; a stillness takes over the poem formally as it does the scene between the girls. In the final four lines of the poem, the “after” to the first four lines’ “before” of erotic knowledge, the poem becomes an aural space. The speaker hears night sounds newly and acutely: “A firefly whirred near my ear, and in the distance/I could hear streetlamps ping/Into miniature suns/Against a feathery sky.” From female knowledge—in the night,

the image of “Linda’s face ...pale as a pecan” is resonant of the pale moon hanging in the night sky—comes information of the male world that the speaker feels in hearing “streetlamps ping/Into miniature suns.” This is a very contemporary, quotidian music of the spheres, as apprehended in a moment of female adolescent sexuality awareness, coming into the backyard from the night street that stretches out into the larger world. Another element Alicia Ostriker sets forth in “The Nerves of a Midwife” as common to women’s poetry at the time Dove was writing *Yellow House* is “the intimate treatment of the body.” In Dove’s “Adolescence” series, this element is connected to what Ostriker identifies as the impulse “to define oneself as authentically as possible from within” (312).

From this ordinary image of girls together at night sharing tidbits of sexual knowledge, Dove moves in “Adolescence—II” (49) to a more surreal<sup>33</sup> set of images, anchored in the very everyday beginning of a girl alone in a bathroom at night, “Venetian blinds slic[ing] up the moon” so that “the tiles quiver in pale strips.” This image at the end of the first of the poem’s five unrhymed tercets is one of faintly ominous foreshadowing. A less innocent stage of female adolescence than that of “Adolescence—I” accretes. The girl in this poem is “waiting” with “[s]weat prickl[ing] behind her knees” and in another foreshadowing, “the baby-breasts are alert.” This girl can call her knees her own, but she is disassociated from her breasts, a site of female sexual pleasure, and, in their development, the first physical sign that a girl is beginning the transition into full adolescence and then womanhood. She is inviting the experience about to unfold in the poem, but she is doing so at crossed feelings. In Audre Lorde’s essay on the erotic as female power, she identifies the erotic as “a resource within..., firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” ; and as “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self, and

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<sup>33</sup>Dove tells Steven Schneider in a 1989 interview , “The word ‘surrealistic’ has been used quite often in describing my work, and I must say I have always been amazed by it. ...I accept it as a fair judgment. To me magic, or the existence of an unexplainable occurrence, is something I grew up with. One shouldn’t try to explain everything. I learned to live with paradox, to accept strange happenings. ...Now I’m not talking about ghost stories; I’m talking about how to live with strangeness” (119).

the chaos of our strongest feeling.”<sup>34</sup> This girl has begun to explore that resource, that measure, in a vividly imagined encounter with figures representing elements of her own erotic explorations, elements she is pulled toward and remains confused regarding.

In the middle three stanzas of the poem, a drama of female adolescent sexuality emerges. “[T]hree seal men with eyes as round/As dinner plates and eyelashes like sharpened tines” appear: “One sits in the washbowl,/One on the bathtub edge; one leans against the door.” They’ve visited her before; she’s conjured them before. When they ask her in a whisper: ““Can you feel it yet?,”” she doesn’t “know what to say, again.” They vanish when she has no reply, “[p]atting their sleek bodies with their hands,” and responding to her silence with ““Well, maybe next time.”” Alone again in the last stanza, the girl, who has called forth from within herself the beginnings of a newly developing sexual and erotic power and then dismissed its immediacy, now sits with the “chaos” of what she has felt of her self: “I clutch at the ragged holes/They leave behind.../Night rests like a ball of fur on my tongue.” Imbricated in the sensuality, sexuality, and even carnality—(those seal men “[p]atting their sleek bodies with their hands” have a pre-pubescent phallic sensibility)—of the experience is the female adolescent struggle to come to terms with her emerging erotic self. When the sealmen ask her, “Can you feel it yet?,” she doesn’t know what to say; she feels it; she just is not yet ready to explore the experience further, to claim “the baby-breasts” as “my baby-breasts.”

In Audre Lorde’s essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” published the year before she delivered her essay on the erotic as a conference paper, she first wrote about the connection between erotic power and the act of poetry, although the word erotic does not appear in the essay. She identifies within “each of us as women... a dark place..., where hidden and growing our true spirit rises,”<sup>35</sup> the authentic self that Ostriker says female poets in the

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<sup>34</sup>“Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” *Sister Outsider* 53 and 54 respectively.

<sup>35</sup> *Sister Outsider* 36.

seventies were defining through the intimate treatment of the body in their poetry, that Dove expresses for the female adolescent in this poem. Lorde goes on in the essay to describe poetry as “giv[ing] name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.” While the girl in the poem is unable to speak in affirmation of her “already felt” experience, the night “rest[ing] like a ball of fur” in her mouth, the poem itself gives name and form to that experience.

In “Adolescence—III” (50) both the poem and the girl whose narrative the poem constitutes give name and form to female adolescent experiences of sexuality and eroticism. This final poem in Dove’s adolescence series focuses on the point at which an adolescent girl begins to claim and assert her sexual, erotic self, and separate from her father. The poem opens in the first of its three stanzas in the backyard where, “[w]ith Dad gone,” mother and daughter work the garden’s “dusky rows of tomatoes.” The adolescent speaker is self-assured in her body, at ease with its experiences of emerging womanhood: “As they [the tomatoes] glowed orange in sunlight/...I too/Grew orange and softer, swelling out/Starched cotton slips.” Not only is she at ease with her developing breasts, their growth is experienced as her growth—in the language of the poem her breasts are “I,” not “the” breasts of the girl in “II,” and more incorporated into the girl’s sense of self than “my” breasts as mere body part.

The poem moves, in the second stanza, to the speaker’s bedroom where she plays with the material stuff of womanhood, wrapping herself in “dresses/That once went to big-band dances,” trying on lipsticks whose “stubs/Glittered in their steel shells,” “baptiz[ing] [her] earlobes with rosewater.” After describing her play at rituals of womanhood, the girl begins a daydream. The third stanza begins: “Looking out at the rows of clay/And chicken manure, I dreamed how it would happen.” Unlike the scene conjured by the girl in “II,” this one is romantic and embraced, even at the risk of the girl losing her father because of it. She imagines “how it would happen”: her male lover comes to meet her in the back yard, “by the blue spruce,” with a “carnation over his heart.” His words are romantic; he calls her

“Madam”; he has “come for” her; he has “loved” her in his “dreams.” When he touches her, the scabs on her knees “fall away.” Childhood falls away. Enter into the daydream the father, whose presence in the poem has been established as an absence in the first three words of the poem, an absence in which the girl grows “orange and softer, swelling out.” She feels and knows the father’s resistance to her coming of age, as she feels and knows hers to her father’s resistance. In her daydream, she imagines seeing over the shoulder of her lover, “my father coming toward us:/He carries his tears in a bowl,/And blood hangs in the pine-soaked air.”

The ending of this daydream and this poem is resonant of the separation between poet dreamer and forefather Don L. Lee in “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream” (16). At the end of that poem Don L. Lee is standing, weeping “[t]ears of iodine,” presumably in response to and to heal the injury he’s suffered in his rejection by the dreamer and the “women in robes.” The women “chant, stamping their feet in wooden cadences” as he tries to explain himself (brusquely cut off by the dreamer speaker), “fists clenched,” “while the singers float away,/ Rustling on brown paper wings.” In each poem, the dreamer refuses the will of the father authority, establishing her own separate identity and agency. Dove has written the poems she wanted to read when she was growing up, about growing up “as a black woman, or woman-child,” into a black female poet who dismisses Don L. Lee’s definition of poetry for her own.<sup>36</sup>

*Yellow House* is replete with poems whose subjects are erotic or sexual experience and sensuality. Like “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee,” the poem “Then Came Flowers” illustrates Rampersad’s observations regarding Dove’s concern with poetry’s traditions. Marlatt’s characterization of contemporary women’s poetry as imbued with the “feeling of listening” to other women’s writing is also evident in this poem. The poem echoes back to

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<sup>36</sup> Ishmael Reed is another contemporary black writer whose view of the Black Arts movement, with which Lee (Madhubuti) is and was associated, aligns with Dove on this issue. He sees the ideology of the movement as “too narrowly constraining the creative freedom of the African-American artist” (Cook 678).



H.D.'s "At Baia."<sup>37</sup> It opens with the lines: I should have known if you gave me flowers/They would be chrysanthemums./The white spikes singed my fingers." This is a more direct, laconic rendition of H.D.'s opening lines: "I should have thought/in a dream you would have brought/some lovely, perilous thing,/orchids piled in a great sheath." Dove's poem goes on to render unrealized, unfulfilled love in much the same manner, eschewing H.D.'s sensuousness of meter and language for an everyday speech pattern that evokes a contemporary weariness and worldliness in matters of love that fall short. In Dove's poem, the speaker asks, "If I begged you to stay, what good would it do me?" In H.D.'s, "Why was it that your hands/(that never took mine)/.../.../.../.../ah, ah, how was it//You never sent(in a dream/the very form, the very scent ...". Other poems about erotic and sexual experience cover a range of subjects. The speaker in "The Boast" (51) plays footsie with someone she goes home with; "The Kadava Kumbis Devise a Way to Marry for Love" (52) takes up cultural rituals and beliefs about marriage, and the loss of a husband; sex as Schumann's meeting with the muse is the subject of "Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins with Affliction" (10).

*Yellow House* emphasizes Dove's equal valuing of the ordinary individual's experience and that of those whose names are part of culture and History in its inclusion of the poems "Robert Schumann, Or: Musical Genius Begins with Affliction" and "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee..." in the same collection as her slave narrative poems about the "individual caught in the web of History, her "Adolescence" series, and other poems that focus on the quotidian experiences of individuals, such as "Great Uncle Beefheart" (67) and "The Son" (69). In the placing side by side such poems within one volume, Dove proposes an interesting link between the individuals she conjures through the ghost town images ("Ars Poetica" *Grace Notes*) of individual American slave experiences, of the lives of individuals unknown to the larger world (such as Great Uncle Beefheart in his

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<sup>37</sup> *Selected Poems* 35.

eponymous poem, or an unnamed young immigrant man in “The Son”) and those who have entered into History with a capital *H*. Even those who have entered valorized History have a billion stories that are their individual histories with a small *h*. In “Robert Schumann...,” her focus is on the “ordinary,” epiphanic moment (“Schumann panted on a whore on a coverlet/and the oboe got its chance”) she imagines launches Schumann into the making of “Cello Concerto in A minor, //Symphony in A, Phantasiestucke, /Concerto for Piano and Orchestra /in A minor, Opus 54.” In designating as suitable subjects for poems such individuals as an adolescent girl, the slave Pamela, and Schumann, Dove proposes that experiences as different as an adolescent girl’s emerging sexuality, the American slave experience, and the moment of creative inspiration of a classical musical great are equally valuable poetic subjects, and that the Historical and historical experiences of individuals have more in common than what divides History and history.

Rampersad in the mid-eighties identifies Dove’s early work as fueled by an impulse “unafraid of temporary obscurity or the surreal half-note, but always seeking finally the representation of clear vision.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the surreal half-note is necessary to some precisely tuned “clear vision[s],” if not all. Poems such as “Adolescence—II” and “III,” and “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee...” illustrate this. The moments of “temporary obscurity” (which Rampersad suggests may be linked at times to those surreal half-notes he sometimes hears in Dove’s poetry) signal the quality of certain experiences as the poet conceives them. For Dove, the language, the clay, shapes the “clear vision.” The surreal half-note makes a song. Temporary obscurity is sometimes part of that song, as in the poem, “The Secret Garden,” in which moments of temporary obscurity and the surreal half-note proliferate and a tongue “grows like celery” between two people. The poem begins, “I was ill, lying on my bed of old papers,” allowing a reader to make sense of such images as “the snails sigh[ing] under their baggage of stone” and the speaker’s visitor (who

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<sup>38</sup> 57.

becomes the lover-healer-savior in the poem) coming “with white rabbits in [his] arms.” They are the products of fever, sickness’s delirium. The beginning line also signals the subject of poetry in the poem. Not only has the visitor come with the magic of white rabbits, but also with “tomatoes, a good poetry.” Magic and tomatoes make for “good poetry,” countering the “old papers,” old texts (Lee’s would be some of the “old papers” for Dove) of the sick bed. The poem suggests that the speaker is sick because of the “old papers,” and that what heals her is the magic of white rabbits and reality of ordinary tomatoes, the poetry of both what is magic and what is real.

In her 1994 interview with William Walsh, Dove speaks of “people point[ing] out passages [in her poems] they think of as having elements of magical realism, and all I can think is: isn’t reality magic?”<sup>39</sup> One could argue for the magic realism of a poem such as “The Secret Garden,” which indeed does incorporate fantastic, even obscure, images into a realistic narrative: “Because of our love-cries, cabbage darkens in its nest;/the cauliflower thinks of her pale, plump children/and turns greenish-white in a light like the ocean’s”; “...I am being conquered/by a cliff of limestone that leaves chalk on my breasts.” Or one could accept Dove’s own insistence that reality has incorporated into it a magical quality; that, in Dove’s words, “just looking at anything closely is pretty magical” (Walsh 152); that because poetry is the close looking at reality it illuminates the magic in the real, as “The Secret Garden” does.

As do “The Secret Garden,” and “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream,” the poems “Nigger Song: An Odyssey,” “O,” and “Nexus” illuminate both Dove’s mindfulness regarding poetry’s “tradition and future” which Rampersad speaks of and the song of poetry that Dove characterizes as the struggle of the poet in language. Both “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee...” and “Nigger Song...” appear in the first section of *Yellow House*. “Nigger Song...” is the last poem in the first section, as “Nexus” is in the fourth, “O,” in

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<sup>39</sup> “Isn’t Reality Magic?” 152.

the fifth and last. Interestingly, each of the final poems in each section can be read as a poem about literature and song, if not about poetry directly. The second section ends with “A Suite for Augustus,” a memory love poem consisting of six parts or movements patterned [loosely] after the early eighteenth century classical music form. (The titles of the movements read together successively veer into poetic utterance: *1963, D.C., Planning the Perfect Evening, Augustus Observes the Sunset, Wake, Back*). The third section of slavery and freedom poetry ends with “Kentucky, 1833,” in which the music of “a hallelujah” and “the book, that, if we could read, would change our lives” figure.

Given the hostility expressed toward Don L. Lee in “Upon Meeting...,” it seems safe to assume that her poem, “Nigger Song: An Odyssey” (18), might involve a redefining of the word “nigger” in opposition to Lee’s definition. William W. Cook states in his essay, “The Black Arts Poets,” that both Lee and Amiri Baraka employ the term “nigger... to represent the traitor.”<sup>40</sup> In Dove’s poem, six people (young men I presume although gender is only discernible through the activity of the poem)<sup>41</sup> on a night time joy ride, are associated with poetry. The car in which they ride has an engine that is “churning ink” as they embark on their odyssey. They ride “into the night”—a time of danger, particularly for African-American men in contemporary U.S. society; the time during which music is most often performed publicly; also a time of dreaming, and of poetic creativity for Dove specifically.<sup>42</sup> Dreaming and poetic creativity both can be associated with danger, at least in the realm of the psyche. Dove herself is “convinced that the voice some writers refer to

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<sup>40</sup> Parini 692.

<sup>41</sup> Vendler reads the six as “adolescents” (“Identity Markers” 384).

<sup>42</sup> In the autobiography Dove provides at the end of *the poet’s world*, she says, “I remain more mentally alert in the hours between midnight and 5 a.m.” (73) and in the essay, “the world in the poet,” describes her “incredible productivity” (50) during a two week stay in southern France during which she regularly wrote all night long, sleeping days and getting to breakfast mid to late afternoon each day.

when describing inspiration is nothing less than the mind talking in its dreams.”<sup>43</sup> The engine that runs the poem churns out in ink the poetry of “Nigger Song.” The men ride through a dark landscape of “factories, ...graveyards/the broken eyes of windows/...//excavation sites.” These images can be read as symbols of the society’s class relationships, the inevitable end to all human life, and the constant starting anew of human endeavor entangled within the inevitable end to each historical era (be it of a neighborhood in the historical sense or a grand civilization in the Historical) in the image, “excavation sites.” They are riding “[i]nto the gray-green nigger night,” into the guts of the landscape they’re moving through, “[i]nto the black entrails of the earth,/The green smoke sizzling on [their] tongues....”

“Poetic language dreams, “ says Dove.<sup>44</sup> Into the dream world, the underworld, heading to the center, these six are going where “Nothing can catch [them].” (This too is where one of the two female figures in *Mother Love* go. The daughter, a Persephone figure, goes where no one can catch her, even Hades, who waits until she wants him (“Lost Brilliance” 51-2)). In the world of “the nigger night” of the poem, the dream is “Nothing can catch us.” It is a world “thick with the smell of cabbages”—a world akin to the one in “The Secret Garden” of “good poetry,” where “[b]ecause of our love-cries, cabbage darkens in its nest.” It is perhaps the world in which eroticism and poetry are imbricated, and the erotic is a source of poetic power and personal strength. The poem ends with the crooning meter of: “Laughter spills like gin from glasses,/And ‘yeah’ we whisper, ‘yeah’/We croon ‘yeah.’” The lulling alliterative *L*’s, the consonant sibilant *s*’s, the soft *g*, the assonant connective short, softer *i*’s, spill into the last two lines. The song moves to its whispering, crooning end, an affirmation of the feeling of freedom in the dream world

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<sup>43</sup> “the world in the poet” *the poet’s world* 50.

<sup>44</sup> “the world in the poet” 67.

underworld, where “Nothing can catch us,” and poetry has been made as the car drives on with the six inside whispering their affirmative “yeah”s.

Like any odyssey, like many a song, this one has passed through an experience, a landscape replete with images that are symbols of changes of fortune, and ends in a place of at least momentary rest, a world in “the black entrails of the earth.” Vendler has suggested that Dove’s poem may be an echo of Gwendolyn Brooks’s “We Real Cool,” with its cast of pool playing male adolescents—the “Seven at the Golden Shovel”—one that “avoids the prudishness of Brooks’s judgmental monologue.” Vendler characterizes the tone of Brooks’s poem as one of “adult reproach of their [the pool players’] behavior” (“Identity Markers” 384). While I disagree with Vendler’s characterization of Brooks’s stance in relationship to the poem’s subject,<sup>45</sup> I agree with the likelihood of Dove’s poem being her more contemporary version of some of the same issues—in Brooks’s poem, the adolescent figures “[l]urk late,” and “[t]hin gin”—and see many connections between Dove’s work more generally and Brooks’s.

Certainly Brooks’s *Annie Allen* prefigures Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah*, in taking on the details of an ordinary American black individual’s life as subject for a complete volume of poetry. Dove’s “Adolescence” series in *Yellow House* takes up some of the same issues as poems from Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville* such as “a song in the front yard” and “the ballad of chocolate Mabbie,” although in a more direct treatment of a girl’s sexual coming of age during adolescence. This more direct articulation of such details may relate to the three decades separating the publishing dates of the two books and cultural changes in the discourse on female adolescent development within that period. Yet Brooks is not a poet who shrinks from the direct detail of female experience (or race experience, for

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<sup>45</sup> Brooks does offer a view of the seven that illustrates the limits (as well as the thrills) of “singing sin,” but the tone seems far more observational than prudish and judgmental, and the view seems an accurate one regarding the disproportionately high death rate of young African-American males. I do not even find it clear in the poem that the behavior of the seven is what leads to them “dying soon”; it may be that the behavior is in response to the feeling they will “Die soon.”

that matter, witness such a poem as the 1969 “Riot”). The poem “the mother,” also in *A Street in Bronzeville*, addresses abortion directly, describing fetuses as “small pulps with a little or with no hair” and “my dim killed children”; still carries today a sense of something being said by a woman that is culturally taboo; and articulates the kind of complex ambiguity Dove achieves in her descriptions of female adolescent experiences of sexuality. These clear connections between Dove and Brooks belie in part what Arnold Rampersad has to say about “Nigger Song....”

Rampersad discusses the poem in relationship to his sense of “[s]uch meagerness of racial feeling” in the poetry in *Yellow House* and *Museum*. He finds the question of its “curious, even dubious roots...surfac[ing] disturbingly when one searches for the final meaning of a poem such as ‘Nigger Song’...” (55). Beyond ways in which Dove’s work seems extremely cognizant of, and in dialogue with, American black poets who have come before her, this statement seems a harsh evaluation of the poem. The six whose experience is conveyed in this poem are not traitors to the race, as Lee or Baraka would have these “niggers”; they sing their song, an affirmative one as balm for and talisman against the vagaries of their history and History as American blacks; they dream and feel a freedom. Lorde would say this is a necessary condition for the survival of the psyche, without which poetry cannot be made—the poetry that expresses “the skeleton architecture of our lives... lay[ing] the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.”<sup>46</sup> The six feel and dream “Nothing can catch us.” If W. E. B. DuBois were alive, he might recognize “Nigger Song: An Odyssey” as a late twentieth century form of the Sorrow Song, factories replacing plantations, images of death still haunting the lyric, the poem representing still the “articulate message” of the black American “to the world... [of] unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (264). The fact that Dove has two poems in her first published book of poetry that take as their

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<sup>46</sup> “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” 38.

subjects the question of a black American *ars poetica*, one expressing resistance to the mandate of one of the spokespoets for the Black Arts movement and establishing a counter ground, the other exploring the poetry of a “nigger song” in the “struggle between words and rhythm and concepts and topics and characters,” also belies the notion that this is a poet expressing “meagerness of racial feeling” in this volume.

In the poem “Nexus” (57), the end poem in the fourth section of *Yellow House*, Dove’s subject of poetry writes itself out literally and figuratively on very different terrain from that of “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee...” and “Nigger Song,” as does “O,” the final poem in the book, wherein the yellow house on the corner of the volume title makes its transformational appearance. Both poems are “small,” as Dove’s wants her “Ars Poetica” poem in *Grace Notes* to be. “Nexus” begins with the speaker of the poem, the poet, writing “stubbornly into the evening,” deep in the effort and struggle of the poetic process, retelling that process in the poem. She aligns herself with the six of “Nigger Song...,” whose car’s engine churns ink as they “ride into the night.” She sees at the window a praying mantis and moves into the poetic world of metaphor—it “rubbed his monkey wrench head against the glass.” The image glosses the era and culture in which she writes with the contemporary, quotidian, workaday image of the monkey wrench, and emphasizes the struggle in language of the poet: monkey-wrenching the poem into being. At the end of the first stanza, the poet sees her literal subject, the praying mantis, “begging vacantly with pale eyes” as the poem stretches before her vacantly, her own stubborn writing a begging of the poem to arrive.

The poem begins to push itself forth in the first line of the second stanza—“the commas leapt at me like worms/or miniature scythes blackened with age.” The concrete form of punctuation marks move the poem’s words—its language—forward into its uncertainty, its struggle, of metaphor and poetic self. Dove tells William Walsh in a conversation about her writing techniques that, “[s]ometimes a typographical approach to a poem can allow one to slip through to the psychological heart” of the poem (149), and here



she tells readers that even a punctuation mark can lead her there. Here again she connects herself to Denise Levertov whose many essays often explore the minute formal elements of poetry and how they function in the meaning of the poem. Dove writes in one of her poet laureate essays about the ways in which various forms of punctuation in Charles Wright's poetry work "to articulate the ineffable, to make inwardness palpable in the very knots and thumbholes of language" ("the world in the poet" 64). The commas push the poet further into the process of writing the poem. The praying mantis which was "begging vacantly with pale eyes" at the end of the first stanza now has "screeched louder,/his ragged jaws opening onto formlessness" at the end of the second. The song of the poem becomes louder and it is a screech, no lyric lulling but a sounding out of the terror the poet experiences in the face of "formlessness." Form achieved in the image of "ragged jaws" opens onto formlessness. The "'tyranny of the articulate' in writing poems" that Steven Bellin (26) recalls Dove having talked to him about has reared its demanding monkey—wrenching head and the poet must search further for the "heart" of the poem.

She must venture outside. There the poet encounters a world both threatening—"the grass hissed at my heels"—and comforting, as "[u]p ahead in the lapping darkness," the poem and the poet meet in the final, epiphanic image of the poem: "a brontosaurus, a poet," this insect who "wobbled, magnified, and absurdly green," as the poet has and is throughout the poem, as Dove suggests poets have and have been throughout the ages in her linking of the dinosaur age with the poet. "Outside is ...where the grapes are," says Dove in response to H.D.'s statement regarding what is "outside the dull little houses of our minds."<sup>47</sup> She agrees with H.D. that "outside is a great vineyard and grapes and rioting and madness and dangers."<sup>48</sup> She agrees, and says, "Yes—but outside is also where the

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<sup>47</sup> "the world in the poet" 66.

<sup>48</sup> *Notes on Thought and Vision* 41.

grapes are.”<sup>49</sup> Through the threat of the hissing grass toward the soothing lapping darkness, the poet makes her way in the evening outside to where the grapes are. The poem rights itself in its final moment as the praying mantis becomes the metaphor for the poet, its begging vacantly and screeching “onto formlessness” analogous to the poet’s travail. The “balance between inner and outer worlds, self-containing yet transformative,” that Dove believes poetic language achieves, has been reached.<sup>50</sup> the poet’s inner world become the outer world of the praying mantis and vice versa. The poem has become the nexus of those inner and outer worlds. The poem has detailed the poet’s struggle in language to come to the nexus of form and content, that imbrication wherein the poem and its meaning come to life.

“Nexus” provides readers with a template of the poet’s writing process, “O” (71) a template of poetry’s transformative possibility. Dove says she is “profoundly fascinated by the ways in which language can change your perceptions.”<sup>51</sup> In “O,” her subject is those ways. The poem begins with instructions on how to say the title word, Swedish for island: “Shape the lips to an *o*, say *a*.” Dove wants the reader to feel the form, hear the sound of language, of this transformative word. The word has “changed the whole neighborhood.” When the speaker looks up and sees the “yellow house on the corner/is a galleon stranded in flowers,” it is easy to imagine she looks up from reading, either having read the word, or having heard the word uttered. Imagination has been activated by one word: “Even the high roar of a leaf-mulcher/could be the horn-blast from a ship/as it skirts the misted shoals.” The language and music of poetry can navigate the dangers of “the misted shoals.”

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<sup>49</sup> The section of *Thought and Vision* from which Dove pulls this quote both starts and ends with the quote and describes H.D.’s encounter with “an enormous moth,” foreinsect or foremetaphor so to speak, of Dove’s “giant praying mantis.” The moth “stumble[s], awkward,” much like the praying mantis wobbles, as it struggles to gain its balance on the rim of H.D.’s cup of wine. As do the praying mantis and the poet in Dove’s poem, the moth and H.D. seem to conflate when H.D. shouts “*he* is drunk—*he* is drunk.”

<sup>50</sup> “the world in the poet” 67,

<sup>51</sup> Taleb-Khyar 350.

Everything could be something else: “nothing’s/like it used to be.” Imagination catalyzed by the power of language may be sufficient: “We don’t need much more to keep things going.”

The poem does not tell readers what it is precisely about language that can effect such powerful transformation as occurs in “O.” After all, the world of poetry, built of concrete images, details, and the intricate dance and song of language, resonates with the elusive, ineffable, the mysteries and possibilities of the world as well as the mysteries and possibilities of language. “Sometimes//a word is found so right it trembles/at the slightest explanation.” With poetry, “You start out with one thing, end/up with another, and nothing’s/like it used to be, not even the future.” Audre Lorde believes “there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real.”<sup>52</sup>

William Walsh calls this poem “a self-discovery of the writer toward language, and metaphorically the use of sailing and boats is the writer’s movement into the future” (149). In “O,” the poet’s movement into the future is also the whole neighborhood of poetry’s movement into the future: “if, one evening, the house on the corner/took off over the marshland, neither I nor my neighbor/would be amazed.” Dove includes the neighborhood of the yellow house on the corner in the neighborhood of poetry. In her poet laureate essay, “a toe over the threshold,” she exhorts “contemporary American poets...to step out the front door and look around, ...say hello to the stranger and join the community beyond the castle walls.” There is “the world that Wittgenstein says ‘is everything that is the case’” (42).

Rampersad is correct. In her very first book, Rita Dove breaks a sort of radical ground. Dove has made sensible and palpable, the existence of a black female American writing poetry who is “in favor of nothing that walls out knowledge in the name of purity,”

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<sup>52</sup> “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” 39.

as she herself says<sup>53</sup> Lorde talks of “poetry as illumination.” She says “it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”<sup>54</sup> For Dove, what her poetry illuminates and witnesses is the world of “everything that is the case” for this poet—female, black, and American. “There is no way to keep yourself ‘pure,’ be it race-specific, gender-specific, or caste-specific,” says Dove, asserting that “[t]he most fascinating thing about life is its flux.”<sup>55</sup> Poetry as Lorde’s “distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births ideas, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding” (36) is the poetry of Dove’s first book. All of the “words and rhythm and concepts and topics and characters” that Dove struggles with in language express the world as she experiences it, dreams it, feels it, knows it. She invites her readers to comprehend the compass and flux, the “truth and beauty,” “corny as it may sound,”<sup>56</sup> of that world she tells readers is her authentic experience. “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves,” Rich says in the early seventies.<sup>57</sup> The poetry Dove wrote throughout that decade and published in *Yellow House* in 1980 witnesses and illuminates Dove’s poetic “quest for autonomous self-definition.” She knows that the flux and “impurity” of her experiences challenge the assumptions of many who read her and of some who came before her. Her project amplifies “the world that... is the case” for herself, as she explores it for herself *in* language, and for the culture at large—because that is her world “that ...is everything that is the case.”

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<sup>53</sup> Bellin 31.

<sup>54</sup> “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” 36.

<sup>55</sup> Bellin 31.

<sup>56</sup> Taleb-Khyar 358.

<sup>57</sup> “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” 35.

## CHAPTER II

### *MUSEUM*

...if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, "tradition" should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labor. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer, and within it a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. ...I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.

—T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919

Rita Dove is a poet of various voracious appetites, committed to paying attention to everything, in poetry, in the world contemporaneous and historical, and in individual experience. This going after the every- and any- thing that she is drawn to is in part the exploration of her refutation of the various cultural and literary admonishments to be Black, female, and poet according to someone else's definition and proscription. While she rejects such definition and proscription, her first five volumes of poetry illustrate a poet mindful of the various poetic and literary traditions (including those of American Black and female poets) that precede contemporary American poetry at the end of the 20th century, as well as of contemporary poetic practices and trends—mindful in ways Eliot asserts any poet must be. Dove recognizes her work is of a cultural continuum; it takes its place within a poetic tapestry that is historical, of which she as poet is conscious. Eliot's "conception of poetry

as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written”<sup>1</sup> is an apt rendering of what Dove’s poetry may be read to achieve. Throughout her various books of poetry, and particularly in *Museum*, Dove’s vast grasp of various poetic traditions constitutes a sort of primordial soup of poetic influences that surface in her poetry in varying ways, some of which figure as direct resonances of poems by other poets, some as *ars poetica* principles informing individual poems or her body of work as a whole.

Walt Whitman’s stance regarding American literary traditions, that nothing should be excluded, that all is worthy as subject of poetry, particularly that which has not yet been voiced in an American poetic tongue, is an established and time-honored American *ars poetica* line Dove works from and negotiates with. In the essay “My Friend Walt Whitman,” Mary Oliver quotes from “Song of Myself” the lines Allen Ginsberg uses as epigraph to *Howl*: “*Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!*.” She talks of Whitman’s “metaphysical curiosity!” (invoking his own punctuation enthusiasms), of how “nothing was outside the range of his interest.”<sup>2</sup> The lines also express Whitman’s curiosity regarding the forbidden, that which is defined or assumed as not suitable to an American poetry. Dove shares Whitman’s curiosity in this regard. Thus she must resist Lee as she does in *Yellow House*’s “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee in a Dream.” Thus she must insist that “her own breathing interrogate the air” from which she draws her own poetic impulses and values, as Carol Muske has her Athena

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<sup>1</sup> “Tradition and the Individual Talent” Abrams 2209.

<sup>2</sup> *Blue Pastures* 15.

figure do in “Alchemy, She Said.”<sup>3</sup> To move toward that moment Muske’s Athena experiences at the end of the poem, when the “cerebral muttering, the bit adjustment/inside her thinking”—the muttering of any one whose *ars poetica* is proscriptive in Dove’s case—“...absolutely cease,” is one of the impulses fueling Dove’s poetry.

In Muske’s poem, the last lines of which I have just quoted, the Athena figure has come through a long process of “alchemy.” Athena is the motherless female—without mother not because her mother is lost to her, but because she was born as “that twisted nail/wrenched from the brow of male will,”<sup>4</sup> with no mother at all in a Greek mythic feat of reproductive technology. In the poem of she begins “made up to be/something a boy had thought or wanted.” The poem details her transmutation through alchemy, through worrying a “heap of scorched alloys” into the identity connoted as a “parthogyne,” (Muske’s self-created,<sup>5</sup> alchemical one might say, word). Athena begins again, a “first cell whose nucleus divided, divided brighter.” Out of being female born of male alone comes the female transformed into a self willed into being by its female experience of and resistance to father, male will, will of the Other for female. While the “gyne” part of Muske’s parthogyne might suggest the figure of a female created solely from the female, the title and the progression of the poem suggest otherwise. Alchemy, the process by which medieval chemical science and speculative philosophy asserted that base metals could be transmuted into gold, is a term used today to designate the transformation of

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<sup>3</sup> Red Trousseau 29-32.

<sup>4</sup> Of Zeus, the great Father of the Greek pantheon, as well as of Athena.

<sup>5</sup> Wherein Muske follows a dictum first formulated by Aristotle: “The vehicle of expression [for the poet] is language.... There are also many modifications of language, which we concede to the poets” (“The Poetics” 49).

something base or ordinary into something valuable and precious. As a process, nothing is lost; it is merely transformed. Such is the case with Dove. She recognizes her work as poet to be the work of that first cell dividing, integrating into its development her negotiation with various poetic traditions called up by the poem she writes. She does not reject the male traditions or the white traditions in poetry out of hand; indeed she chooses to embrace some of them in her negotiation with Western poetic traditions, as is perhaps most strikingly enacted in her book *Mother Love*, in her use of the English Renaissance tradition of the sonnet sequence. Much of the poetry in *Museum* pays homage to, revisits, and refigures artifacts and personages deemed significant in the canon of Western culture.

As in her first volume, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, in *Museum*, Dove continues to “Steal and plunder” from various literary and poetic traditions, as H.D. exhorts in *The Trilogy*; continues to “taste and see” a la Levertov; continues to dust the museum of received poetic traditions. The proper subjects—Boccaccio and Fiametta, the two Saint Catherines (of Siena and of Alexandria)<sup>6</sup> various classic landscapes, fossils—are given a proper dusting; and emerge newly seen, still recognizable, when the dust settles. Arrayed across the volume are poems of the lives of various figures from History as well as history, many famous, some unsung (“Banneker”),<sup>7</sup> some unknown as well (“Dusting” and the father poems in the third section, “My Father’s Telescope”). While she’s stealing and plundering from various poetic and literary traditions—and resisting the authority of

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<sup>6</sup> I should note that figures such as the Catherine saints have become known and in some ways part of Western culture through the revisionist work of various feminist scholars and are thus part of the newly refigured Western cultural canon of the last quarter century.

<sup>7</sup> Again, the writer and astronomer Benjamin Banneker is a neglected figure that recent African American scholarship has recovered for, and placed into, the annals of the United States history.



any proscription that does not come from her own exploration and appreciation of its actual practice in poetry, she's also dusting the museum, rearranging its design, amplifying its collection, and documenting the newly dusted collection cleared of what Dove characterizes as the "layers of unclarity"<sup>8</sup> clinging to received artifacts of culture.

"Dusting"(9) is the epigraph poem to the *Museum* volume. It is a poem that reappears in Dove's next volume, *Thomas and Beulah*, as one of Beulah's poems, those constituting her 'side of the story.'<sup>9</sup> In the course of the poem Beulah dusts and muses on a romantic experience in her girlhood years—"before/Father gave her up/with her name...." The experience involves a miraculous unfreezing unto life of the goldfish her boyfriend had won for her at the fair, found frozen in its bowl upon her return from a dance, the front door blown wide open on a winter night. The poem ends with the same movement the goldfish makes when he swims "free" once the ice is melted. All the while Beulah has been dusting, she's been trying to recall the name of that boyfriend. It too swims free at the end of the poem, its own stanza, its own line, swimming away from the narrative stanzas during which Beulah dusted, mused, and struggled to remember his name: "Maurice."

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<sup>8</sup> Rubin and Kitchen 236.

<sup>9</sup>Having the advantage of reading *Museum* from the vantage point of 1999 (more than a decade after "Dusting" makes its second appearance in another collection of Dove's poetry) one recognizes an *ars poetica* gesture which will turn out to be an established feature of her poetry in its subversion of traditional poetic expectation. She puts a poem in one position in a book—as epigraph to *Museum*, then places the exact same poem in a different position in a different book three years later—part way into Beulah's section of the volume, *Thomas and Beulah*. In doing so, she asserts, a poem does not repeat itself exactly when its relationship to other poems is changed, nor when the poems it is in relationship to change. (Eliot would agree.) She further says, notice the relationship between Catherine of Siena's story and Beulah's; Boccaccio's obsession with Fiametta, Thomas's with Lem. As she did in *Yellow House*, Dove once again asserts (through her inclusion of "Dusting" in two books of such apparently diverse subjects) that the individual's story is as important and valuable to History as that of those whose names and stories we know through History. In making the distinctions she does between the individual and the Individual, between history and History she recognizes that each has different cultural value and at the same time asserts that each is equally valuable to culture.

Setting “Dusting” as the epigraph poem to the *Museum* volume establishes two themes for the volume, both having to do with the freedom Dove claims as poet. First, the epigraph describes Dove’s relationship to poetic traditions, and, second, it points to her focus on the functions of language in poetry. The figure of the woman dusting as an introduction to a book titled *Museum* sets up the association between Beulah dusting her way through a memory of a frozen fish freed from its immobilization in ice and Dove’s project as poet to dust the museum of American poetry of various received traditions, to free the various artifacts, images, and stories that are the subjects of her poems in the book from the stasis of the cultural traditions in which they are rooted. In a 1986 interview with Stan Stavel Rubin and Judith Kitchen, discussing having written some of the *Thomas and Beulah* poems at the same time she was writing the *Museum* poems, Dove says about “Dusting”:

When I finished *Museum*, this poem really didn’t fit into the whole concept or into any of the sections, but it did fit into the idea of *Museum*; that is, dusting, wiping away layers of unclarity and things like that. And that’s why it’s there as a first poem, and also because it’s a poem that deals with people. That was the way to enter *Museum*, to deal with the dusting and the memory which is a museum in itself, and then to go from that to the artifacts, which is what the first section is about—the hills, the archaeology of things. Dusting is a kind of archaeology. That’s why I put it ahead of all the other poems, as a prologue. (236)

As the goldfish frees itself from the bowl and “Maurice” from the layers of Beulah’s memory, so too the landscape of Argos in “The Ants of Argos” is freed from its static place in classical Greek history. Likewise the now adult daughter in the volume’s section of father poems—“My Father’s Telescope”—frees herself from the stasis of the child’s relationship to and vision of the father. So the fossil in “The Fish in the Stone” is released from its fixed form, realized as a sentient consciousness acknowledging and freeing itself

from its lack of dynamic subjectivity as object of another species' inspection and analysis, of which it is "weary." Thus is the whole notion of what a museum's collection should constitute freed by Dove's freeing of various cultural museum pieces from their cultural and historical stasis and by her insistence upon including in this museum the creations of ordinary individuals, such as her father's remarkable, homemade *non pareil* grape sherbet in the poem of the same name, "Grape Sherbet," alongside the creations of those recognized as culturally important, such as Boccaccio in the poems "Boccaccio: The Plague Years" and "Fiametta Breaks Her Peace," and the twentieth century German painter Christian Shad, whose painting "Agost, der Flugelmensch und Rasha, die schwarze Taube," is the inspiration for the poem "Agosta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove." Dove's museum of culture is a collection that widens the range of what should be housed in a building of objects of cultural, historical, or scientific significance or interest.

Often this amplification through dusting is achieved by Dove's representation of the Other side of history and culture. In "Boccaccio: The Plague Years" (26), Dove has the fourteenth century Florentine poet recall from a distance the streets of Florence during the plague. In the last of the three stanzas of the poem, he is positioned, "[r]olling out of the light/...lean[ing] his cheek/against the rows of bound leather," remembering "Fiammetta!," the female figure the object of his gaze and praise in his writings—"He had described her/a hundred ways; each time/she had proven unfaithful" (26). In Dove's representation of him, Boccaccio finds solace from the plague in "the rows of bound leather," a phrase denoting received classic and traditional texts, and in his various renditions of Fiammetta, "out of the light," in unilluminated vision. He sees Fiammetta having slipped out of his literary grip,

out of his script for her, “unfaithful” to his representation of her. In Dove’s companion piece to this poem, “Fiammetta Breaks Her Peace” (27), which comes directly after “Boccaccio: The Plague Years” in *Museum*, it is Boccaccio who has been “unfaithful” to Fiammetta in his representation of her and it is Fiammetta who scripts her own side of the story. Fiammetta speaks to her mother in the poem, describing in detail the plague victims’ gruesome day by day progress toward death. In the penultimate of the five stanzas in Fiammetta’s poem, she speaks of Boccaccio’s attempt to fix her in his gaze: “And to think he wanted me/beautiful! To be his fresh air/and my breasts two soft/spiced promises. *Stand still*, he said/once, *and let me admire you*” (27-8). In her poem Fiammetta articulates her own experience of the plague years, does not stand still, inanimate, for Boccaccio’s gaze, and breaks free from Boccaccio’s vision of her.

In the poem “The Fish in the Stone” (13), the subject, a fossil, comes to life through the imaginative act of the poem. It breaks free of Science’s gaze and its position as object “of analysis, the small/predictable truths,” asserting its subject agency: “The fish in the stone/knows” a full range of things the scientist does not, including the mystery of “...why the scientist/in secret delight/strokes the fern’s/voluptuous braille” (13). Dove’s dusting away of the “layers of unclarity” she finds in the received museum of culture and history reveals the usually neglected, unrecognized, fully animate subjectivity of such objects and figures as she chooses as subjects in these poems and many others in her *Museum*.

The poem “Anti-Father” (54-5) appears in the section “My Father’s Telescope.” (Here most of the poems focus on the father from the child’s point of view. In the context

of the whole of *Museum* that focus can be read as on the father(s) of poetic tradition.) In the poem, the now-adult daughter<sup>10</sup> speaker asserts her subject agency also. The daughter speaker begins the poem saying: “Contrary to/tales you told us/.../...the stars/are not far//apart. Rather/they draw/closer together/with years.” At the end of the poem she proclaims: “Stars//speak to a child./The past//is silent..../Just between//me and you,/woman to man,//outer space is/inconceivably//intimate” (54-5). The daughter breaks free from the received father-knowledge; asserts that the child-apprentice of the “past//is silent” and an adult “woman” (the Muskean alchemized “parthogyne,” if you will) has broken free from that past; claims her own knowledge of “outer space” and her universe; draws the father closer to her in an ‘intimacy inconceivable’ when he was a man of more knowledge and experience and she a girl of less, listening to his “tales.” The poet-daughter figure I read layered into the daughter figure of the poem suggests that “to register personal human experience against the larger context of history”<sup>11</sup> is as legitimate an act of curating the museum of culture and history as placing in that museum’s collection culturally approved artifacts, works of art, and Historical information.

Widely read, widely educated in classical culture, as well as in material not yet entered (and perhaps never to be) into the canon of classical, valorized, or otherwise recognized cultural traditions,<sup>12</sup> Dove herself breaks free from various poetic proscriptions in *Museum*. She chooses subjects that often are not traditionally “Black” or “female.”

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<sup>10</sup> In her interview with Judith Kitchen and Stan Stanvel Rubin Dove discloses that indeed the poems in this section are of autobiographical origin (Rubin & Ingersoll 234).

<sup>11</sup> Dove speaking of her poetic impulses in Schneider, 115.

<sup>12</sup> Rampersad has also noted this characteristic underlying Dove’s poetry. He speaks of her “brilliant mind, reinforced by what appears to be very wide reading...” (53).

“...how do I know it ISN’T about being black or a woman,” she asks, about a flower as suitable material for her poetry.<sup>13</sup> How do I know a fossil or a fourteenth century Florentine poet isn’t about being black or a woman, she asks in *Museum*. In her introduction to her 1993 *Selected Poems*, Dove writes: “When I am asked, ‘What made you want to be a writer?’ my answer has always been: ‘Books.’ First and foremost, now, then, and always, I have been passionate about books” (xix). *Museum* is a text that illustrates this. Books are what lead most of us to knowledge of the fossil, to Boccaccio. *Museum* is a book of books—a book which amplifies the definition of the late twentieth century Black female poet and the contours of American poetic traditions and themes ( of which contemporary African-American literary traditions and themes are a part).

The histories of Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Alexandria, the twentieth century Dominican Republic dictator Rafael Trujillo, Tou Wan and Liu Shen in mid Western Han Dynasty, of Homer’s Nestor; Boccaccio’s *Decameron*; Shakespeare and black American blues singer Champion Jack Dupree (appearing on the same screen, in the same poem, in Dove’s play with Eliot’s “historical sense”); the letters and works of Benjamin Banneker in 18th century United States; a painting by Christian Shad—all inform various poems in this volume. For Dove, as for Eliot, the poet “must be aware” of the “mind of [her] own country,” and of the fact that the mind of a country progresses, develops over time—“is a mind which changes.”<sup>14</sup> Dove practices a poetry mindful of such historical progression and development, a poetry mindfully aware of her own country’s

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<sup>13</sup> Lloyd 1.

<sup>14</sup> Abrams 2208.

literary and poetic traditions, which indeed attempts to capture the “mind of [her] country” and which, in the case of the United States, includes European and in this self-defined postmodern era, any and every cultural traditions, such as the Chinese Western Han Dynasty’s. In this sense Dove departs from Eliot, whose directives were intra-cultural, in claiming any of the world’s cultures as relevant and appropriate to the archaeological project of American poetry, as she defines it in her discussion with Rubin and Kitchen about the poem “Dusting.”<sup>15</sup>

In this sense too she joins the poet Melvin Tolson, the title of whose book, *Harlem Gallery*, resonates in the title of Dove’s book, *Museum*. Tolson’s *Harlem Gallery* takes Africa as one of its inspirations, in a move other black American poets have made also. Dove herself eschews this particular move for herself as poet for reasons she describes to Mohamed Taleb-Khyar:

I have a complicated relationship with Africa because, like many Black Americans, I went through a period when Africa was a mythic place for me—like in Countee Cullen’s poem “What Is Africa to Me,” my image of Africa contained a few totemic emblems, and that was it. It had nothing to do with life as it is lived. ....I realized that Africa is not a homogenous cultural entity, but a continent with radically diverse cultures and peoples, even if most of them would be classified as Black in the United States. And though our centuries-old connection might justify focusing extra attention on African causes, especially an emphasis on African history, it didn’t justify a mythical Africa in my heart. ...Any response I could have about Africa today has to be woefully uninformed, since I have never been there. Well, perhaps I still harbor some special sentiment, but I don’t want to romanticize this.<sup>16</sup>

Notwithstanding Dove’s position on using Africa as a broad poetic source, *Museum* and *Harlem Gallery*, as texts written by Black American writers, share the poetic practice of

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<sup>15</sup> 236. Again, Rampersad speaks to this in part when he goes on to say that Dove’s poet’s mind “seeks for itself the widest possible play, an ever expanding range of reference....” (53).

<sup>16</sup> Taleb-Khyar 355.

bringing into poetry elements of cultures other than North American, and other than African in Tolson's case. As Dove herself has noted in an essay on *Harlem Gallery*, it is a book that employs a myriad of cultural elements outside those of North America or Africa, such as "allusions to Vedic Gods, Tintoretto, and Pre-Cambrian poetry, as well as snippets in Latin and French,"<sup>17</sup> and in what I read as an allusion to classical Greece, the use of Greek alphabet letters as titles to the twenty-four sections of the book.<sup>18</sup> Both books also meditate on the function and creation of art and culture for and by American Blacks and Americans generally. *Museum* may repudiate Lee's directives, but it pays homage to Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*, whose Curator hears "the words of Archbishop Trench:/'The present is only intelligible in the light of the past,'" and who asserts: "each decade reshaped the dialects of/the owl's hoot,/the lamb's bleat,/the wolf's cry,/the hyena's laugh," in echoes of Eliot.<sup>19</sup>

When Dove talks about trying to find "truth" through the language of poetry, one of the truths she is trying to establish is that of her own black American female poet's experience. In this matter, Tolson is once again Dove's Black forefather poet. In *Harlem Gallery*, the Curator, whose voice narrates most of the book, says: "Poor Boy Blue,/the Great White World/and the Black Bourgeoisie/have shoved the Negro artist into/the white and not-white dichotomy,/the Afroamerican dilemma in the Arts—/the dialectic of/to be or

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<sup>17</sup> "Telling It Like It Is: Narrative Techniques in Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*" 109.

<sup>18</sup> Tolson makes direct references to classical Greek culture in the book also, such as describing a figure's "character (in the Greek sense) ("Eta" 51) and in calling up Homer's Nestor: "...no Nestor taught..." ("Omega" 165).

<sup>19</sup> "Omega" 171 and "Beta" 25 respectively. In "Mu" the figure Hideho Heights ("the vagabond bard of Lenox Avenue," "Lambda" 68) "muse[s] aloud,/'Do I hear The Curator rattle Eliotic bones?'" 72.



not to be/a Negro.”<sup>20</sup> What any strand of her identity contributes to Dove’s poetry is not be circumscribed or proscribed, whether it be by a dominant White literary and cultural establishment that positions a Black female writer as Other, or another Black poet also positioned as Other within that same cultural construct, such as Don L. Lee, who defines Black poetry within confines too narrow for Dove. Dove says in her 1991 interview with Taleb-Khyar, in response to the question, “How about your stand on politics?”:

I think my notion of what my “role” is or what it is that I’m trying to do in a social sense is to constantly remind myself, my students, and my readers of our individuality. To me, one of the greatest dangers for people in this country is the temptation to think in terms of groups rather than to extol each person’s uniqueness. There is a great urge among all Americans, not only Black Americans, although I’d like to address them specifically, to fit in, to be like everybody on television, to share a style... instead of living an independent life. In my poems... I try very hard to create characters who are seen as individuals, ...as persons who have their very individual lives, and whose histories make them react to the world in different ways. One could argue that insisting upon that individuality is ultimately a political act, and to my mind, this is one of the fundamental principles a writer has to uphold.<sup>21</sup>

Her last statement here is specific to the characters that people her poetry, but I believe it also applies to her own position as poet. Rampersad characterizes Dove’s “rang[ing] widely as writer” as “an essential part of her commission to herself as poet” (59). While he seems a little uneasy (as I have noted before) regarding how he sees Dove’s focus on race issues in this volume as well as in *Yellow House*, he nonetheless picks up on a poetic principle of Dove’s that explicates her position as black poet. *Museum* asserts that being American, black, female, and poet in late twentieth century United States, to “write black,”<sup>22</sup> is in truth for Dove to “superannuate (n)either” the likes of “Shakespeare, (n)or

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<sup>20</sup> “Phi” 146. See also footnote 26 for a related comment by Dove.

<sup>21</sup> Taleb-Khyar 361.

<sup>22</sup> I refer to Don L. Lee’s *Think Black* in choosing the phrase “write black.” Dove herself has spoken in interviews about this concept also, although not in direct relationship to Lee.

Homer, (n)or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen.”<sup>23</sup> It is not that race or gender do not matter to Dove. They do. She has said so. Countless of her poems attest to that. What her poetry also attests to is that all poetic traditions matter to her, are of interest to her, are as worthy of her poetic passion as the matters of race and gender.

I have mentioned Whitman as a poet forefather whose desire to expand the range of what is possible in American poetry Dove embraces in her own particular way. Resistance to an *ars poetica* tyranny is a solidly American poetic tradition. Each American poet who engages her or his generation’s peer poets and forepoets marks out the territory of that resistance from her or his own particular position. Dove’s contemporary Charles Simic joins her in resisting poetic proscription, and indeed suggests that poetry is by nature resistance to tyranny of culture. In his 1997 essay, “The Trouble with Poetry,” he suggests that the nature of poetry, which he calls “that foolish diversion for the politically incorrect” (33) is cultural trouble—of the highest order. After all, according to Simic, “[a]s far as poets are concerned, only fools are seduced by generalizations” (34), a perspective that Dove as poet would enjoin her readers and critics to consider when reading her work. While Simic’s essay focuses on the contradictory, paradoxical qualities of lyric poetry that make it unpopular reading—yet irresistible writing for poets—I believe that when he says, “[a]ny attempt to reform poetry, to make it didactic and moral, or even to restrict it within some literary ‘school,’ is to misunderstand its nature” (35), that he provides an exact dictum for approaching Dove’s *ars poetica* project.

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<sup>23</sup> Abrams 2208.

The last poem in the second section of *Museum*, “At the German Writers Conference in Munich” (43-4), meditates on the relationship between two different art forms of two different historical eras, late twentieth century writing and medieval tapestry. It begins with a description of a banner proclaiming the name of the professional writers group sponsoring the conference: “Association of German/Writers in the Union of Printers/and Paper Manufacturers.” The banner stretches across a tapestry hanging in the conference hall, obscuring part of the tapestry. The poem proceeds to detail what one can see of the tapestry. The lines “The tapestry pokes out/all over” call attention to the fact that the poem speaks to an incomplete view of the tapestry, visually, but also, implicitly, culturally, as is made explicit later in the poem, when the poem’s observer/narrator comments on what the lettering on the tapestry might say. The poem is itself a trope of dynamics illustrating Eliot’s dictum that “when a new work of art is created ...something... happens simultaneously to all works of art which preceded it.”<sup>24</sup> The poem’s dynamic of creativity focuses on what occurs simultaneously to the medieval tapestry—the work of art preceding the poem, as a new work of art—the poem itself, is enacted as the observations of the narrator. The poem moves from a description of the gathering with the banner hanging “above the heads of the members/of the board” to the various partially obscured images of the tapestry: “two doves signify[ing]/a union endorsed/by God, and the Church” and the “banner/unfurled and inscribed/in Latin” on the part of the tapestry visible above the German Writers banner. The poem’s speaker and observer muses that perhaps the tapestry

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<sup>24</sup> Abrams 2207. While Eliot focuses on works of art within a particular genre, poetry, he also has in mind culture at large. He speaks in the same essay to the poet not abandoning the works of such foreartists as Homer or the Magdalenian cave artists, thus asserting that the poet’s world is one informed not only by all the poetry preceding it and surrounding it contemporaneously, but also by various other art forms, as Dove’s poem also suggests.

banner says “Association of Tapestrers/in the Union of Wives/and Jewish Dyers,” wherein the historical of the world of medieval culture is imaginatively linked with the contemporary world of European writers’ conferences culture.

The great value of tradition for Eliot is that it involves “the historical sense.” The “traditional” poet is the one whose poetry is marked by the historical sense, “which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together.”<sup>25</sup> Such poetic consciousness marks Dove’s juxtaposition in this poem of the bare bones, mostly realist description of the late twentieth century professional gathering of writers and the carefully detailed description of the gorgeous medieval images of the tapestry. Therein the sense of the timeless and the temporal and of the two together simultaneously inform one another. In the first stanza of the poem Dove sets up the late twentieth century temporal in describing the hall in which the writers conference takes place. The poem’s speaker notes that the banner is “taut and white/as skin (not mine),” bringing to the reader’s attention the speaker’s racial identity. The placement of these lines, just after the line “above heads of the members/of the board” and just preceding the line about the banner itself, “tacked across a tapestry,” allow two readings of those lines, one that the banner itself is white, the other that the board members are racially white. In Rampersad’s review essay on Dove’s first two books of poetry he expresses a somewhat tentative dismay regarding the fact that, in his reading of the books’ poetry, Dove’s poems do not address or present “even in part ...the tension many of us see as ever-present between the races” (55). Yet these lines regarding racial identity and cultural activity belie a

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<sup>25</sup> Abrams 2207.

reading of Dove's poetry as unaware of racial issues and tensions, as did many of the poems in *Yellow House*. Racial identity, very much an element of late twentieth century consciousness, is highlighted here as one of the temporal elements involved in the poem's speaker's observation and experience. The poem indeed explores the tension between the speaker observer whose skin is not white and her Other. Perhaps the problem for a reader like Rampersad is that it is noted dispassionately.<sup>26</sup>

The poem ends with a description of what "first caught [the speaker's] eye," visible beneath the banner: the "dainty shoes" of a maiden, and "the grotesquely bent/fetlock-to-ivory hoof/of the horse" seen above the banner as "a white horse craning/to observe the royal party." The shoes and the hoof are "both/...in flowers" in the final lines of the poem. In the medieval tapestry the maiden and the horse—the Other in relation to the human whose cultural view is concretized in the tapestry, have in common standing "in flowers," in the beauty of the natural world, a motif employed in many creative artifacts. So too Dove suggests, at the late twentieth century German writers' conference, the writers, and the speaker who is racially Other in relation to the board members whose culture is the subject and *raison d'être* of the conference—who may be seen as "craning/to observe the royal party" of the writers conference, and who too may be seen in the poem as "grotesquely" viewed by the writers for whom she or he is Other; may both be standing in common cultural material, albeit from different positions, including the timeless and the temporal.

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<sup>26</sup> Dove says in her 1991 interview with Taleb-Khyar, in response to his question regarding which of her books of poetry she likes best: "*Museum* has always been a favorite of mine because I like the—no, not exactly cynicism, but its dispassionate eye..." (362).

In a 1995 interview in which Dove discusses the Catherine poems in *Museum*, the interviewer, Grace Cavalieri, notes that “[w]hat permeates your work is an incredible trust in relationships, which is not an ordinary thought today.” Dove replies that she’s not saying “we should be gullible or foolish, but it’s the ‘courage of our tenderness,’ as D.H. Lawrence, I think, said in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, that we have the courage to be open to someone” (14-15). It is such openness to the Other for Dove, whose femaleness and blackness script her as Other within Euro-American culture and society, and a belief in the potential for amelioration of the historical and contemporary tensions of that relationship, that underlie this poem. This is yet another example of Dove’s tendency toward inclusion rather than exclusion. The Other, as represented by the board members of the conference, the maiden and the “ash-blond princess” of the tapestry, is recognized by Dove, not excoriated here, in a move toward openness, from the tensions articulated and represented in the poem—social, cultural, historical, and aesthetic—to a moment of common ground.

In 1994, eleven years after *Museum* was published, Dove delivered two Poet Laureate addresses published a year later by the Library of Congress as the essay collection *the poet’s world*. Recalling Levertov, in the first of the two lecture essays, in a section titled “a toe over the threshold,” she suggests that American poets, (self-inclusively referred to as “we”), rather than “bear witness” to “the life we see reported on television or read about in books” (40), should “Taste the air, see what is out there” (42) in life. This is an intriguing comment, coming from a poet who just eleven years prior to uttering it had published *Museum*, a book about landscapes, objects, history, and persons most ordinarily read about in books, because it is only through books that most come to know them, their presence in our lives. Is Dove’s Poet

Laureate statement, informed by its Levertovian reference, a repudiation of *Museum*? I think not. Dove is keenly aware, as her interviews and poems like “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee...” indicate, of the cultural boundaries expected of her as a black female poet writing these poems in the mid seventies to early eighties. To write the poetry in *Museum* was “to step out the front door” of those cultural boundaries, to “say hello to the stranger and join the community beyond the castle walls” (42), or rather, in the case of writing *Museum*, beyond the gendered and racialized ghetto walls in place for her as poet, to Europe, Asia, the Dominican Republic.<sup>27</sup>

In Levertov’s poem “O Taste and See,” (in which she recalls Rukeyser’s poem “Then I Saw What the Calling Was,”<sup>28</sup> and a poem Dove quotes just prior to her own “taste and see” comment in “a toe over the threshold”), the question of what to taste and see is “if anything all that lives/to the imagination’s tongue,//grief, mercy, language,/tangerine, weather.” Helen Vendler’s comments regarding “Parsley,” the last poem in *Museum*, provide a characterization of Dove’s poet openness and voracious poet appetite for all and any experience as represented in the poem: “[w]e... see Dove’s inveterate wish to imagine and understand, if not forgive, the mind of the victimizer as well as the mind of the victims.” She goes on to say that “[t]he position of victimage, and victimage alone, seems imaginatively insufficient to Dove, since it takes in only one half of the world.”<sup>29</sup> The subject of the poem is the decision in 1957 by the Dominican dictator General Rafael

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<sup>27</sup> In her 1987 review of Derek Walcott’s *Collected Poems*, Dove, who wins the Pulitzer that year for *Thomas and Beulah*, discusses the dilemma of “any member of a minority who ‘makes it.’” Among other things: “Write about home and you blaspheme; choose other topics and you’re a traitor.” (“Either I’m Nobody or I’m a Nation” 67).

<sup>28</sup> Both Rukeyser’s and Levertov’s poems are *ars poetica* poems. Levertov recalls “the marvel/orchards” of Rukeyser’s poem in her lines “living in the orchard and being/hungry, and plucking/the fruit.”

<sup>29</sup> “Rita Dove: Identity Markers” 387.

Trujillo to order the slaughter of 20,000 black Haitian workers “because they could not pronounce the letter *r* in *perejil*, the Spanish word for parsley.”<sup>30</sup> Dove has said that the only historical facts she worked with in the poem were those of the Haitians working the cane fields, the slaughter itself, and Trujillo’s publicly stated reason for it being the Haitians’ inability to pronounce the *r* in *perejil*.<sup>31</sup> In “Parsley,” she allows her “imagination’s tongue” to “taste and see” “grief, mercy, language,/tangerine/weather...,” as Levertov instructs in “O Taste and See.” She imagines the origins of the impulses in Trujillo coming to such an horrific justification for such an horrific act. The poem proceeds in this regard according to Levertov’s dictum “to/ breathe...,bite/savor, chew, swallow, transform//into our flesh our/deaths....” the world that is “if anything all that lives”—the world that is Wittgenstein’s “everything that is the case.” “O Taste and See” celebrates the poet as one “being/hungry, and plucking/the fruit” of “all that lives,”<sup>32</sup> as does *Museum*, as does “Parsley,” albeit through the paradox of exploring and detailing a figure whose impulses are against tasting and seeing.

“Parsley” is divided into two sections: “1. *The Cane Fields*,” and “2. *The Palace*.”

Dove had originally attempted to write the first section, told from the workers’ point of view, as a villanelle; the second, which focuses on the general’s decision and the origins of

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<sup>30</sup> Dove in the “Notes” section at the end of *Museum* 78.

<sup>31</sup>Rubin and Ingersoll (230). In an essay on “Parsley,” Dove says she first read of the massacre in Hubert Fichte’s *Petersilie* (the title is the German word for parsley) and later “found corroboration of the parsley massacre in an American historical text” (Pack & Parini 78-9). In Vendler’s notes in “Identity Markers” on the history of this massacre she cites from Robert D. Crasweller’s biography, *Trujillo* (New York: Macmillan, 1996) that the number killed is not clear, estimates ranging from 5000 to 25,000, between 15,000 and 20,000 being “a reasonable estimate” although “guesswork” (pp. 154-56 in Crasweller). Vendler fn. 13, p. 397.

<sup>32</sup> All Levertov quotes are from *O Taste and See* 53.



that decision, as a sestina. In *"The Cane Fields,"* Dove writes in the collective voice of the Haitian cane field workers; in *"The Palace"* she writes the general's story as a second person narrative. For Dove, the voice of the workers finds form, that of the villanelle, albeit a form depleted by the incursions of the general into their story. In *"The Palace,"* the poem's language distances itself from the person whose side of the story the section tells, achieves hardly any semblance of the sestina form, cannot achieve it from within the voice of the general. The form of *"The Palace"* separates itself from the poet's original design intentions, the voice of *"The Palace"* from that of its subject. In the various repetitions of words, sounds, and phrases, vestiges of both villanelle and sestina forms remain in the respective sections in which Dove attempted them, albeit much less markedly so in the second section. Vendler characterizes each section respectively as "quasi-villanelle" and "almost-sestina."<sup>33</sup> I agree with her assessment of the first section, but not of the second, which I consider a failed sestina-attempt, for reasons I will discuss further on. In formal terms, the two sections represent "what will suffice"<sup>34</sup> for Dove for the subject at hand. Here is illustration of Dove's finding the traditional forms unavailable to do the work following the language,<sup>35</sup> and then finding a way to renegotiate those formal traditions in the creative acts of the poem itself, within which "grief, mercy, language,/tangerine, weather" all mingle on imagination's tongue in a most disturbing, debased mix.

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<sup>33</sup> ("Rita Dove: Identity Markers" 388).

<sup>34</sup> This phrase comes from the first stanza of Wallace Stevens's "Of Modern Poetry": "The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice. It has not always had/To find: the scene was set; it repeated what/Was in the script./Then the theatre was changed/To something else. Its past was a souvenir" (*The Palm at the End of the Mind* 174).

<sup>35</sup> Dove says "It's by language that I enter the poem, and that also leads me forward" (Rubin and Ingersoll 238).

Everything in “Parsley” represents a perversion, including most pervasively the perversion of language. In the first section, the images of nature gather an increasingly ominous sensibility and are linked in the second section to the general’s perversions of his grief over his mother’s death. The songbird, the canary, of the epigraph poem in the volume—“Dusting,” is here transformed into a talking, kept bird, the “parrot imitating spring,” a signal of various perversions in the poem, including that of speech imitating spring, imitating anything instead of feeling. In “Dusting,” Beulah generates “the canary in bloom,” the bliss of the poem unfolding; in “Parsley,” El General appropriates the parrot as talisman of perversion. The spring the parrot imitates is the General’s perversion of mother love (in his inability to grieve her properly according to the customs of his land), also that of the spring called to mind in the workers coming up “green” after their slaughter, in a call and response by Dove to Whitman’s “the beautiful uncut grass of graves,” the “curling grass,” which may “transpire” from “the breasts of young men,” “mothers’ laps.”<sup>36</sup> Its feathers are “parsley green,” which connects the parrot to the tradition the general recalls in the penultimate stanza of the “*The Palace*”: “the tiny green sprigs/men of his village wore in their capes/to honor the birth of a son,” in honor of patriarchy, which truncates the power of the mother, the female, emphasized by the word “sprig” here representing a truncated version of spring.

“*The Cane Fields*” is a haunting formal enactment of the poet Dove’s exploration of how language might be used—indeed how it has been used, against the affirmative, transformative impulses she so celebrates as poet. Representation of debased uses of

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<sup>36</sup> “Song of Myself” Baym et al. 1977-8.

language proliferates in this section. Clustered around and in the repetitions of the refrain phrases and rhymes, the mystery of poetic language is enacted. “The children [of the cane workers] gnaw their teeth to arrowheads,” to weapons.<sup>37</sup> When teeth are gnawed to arrowhead points articulated speech is debased. His mother’s child, the general, too, has gnawed his teeth to weaponry. He has used the letter *R* as the weapon by which to kill the workers, as antidote to his grief. The Creole-speaking Haitian workers cannot move their tongues toward their teeth to articulate the Spanish *r*. The mountain that rises behind the sugar cane is Karalina; they call it “*Katalina*.” When the general remembers “his mother’s smile” in the second section, “*The Palace*,” it is a perverted image—her teeth are “gnawed to arrowheads.”

In this poem, wherein form succumbs to the perversion of its content, traditional Western European poetic forms cannot provide what Paul Fussell calls “real formal excellence,” in which “both the meter and the form act as organic elements of accurate meaning.”<sup>38</sup> “*The Cane Fields*” follows the villanelle pattern of five tercets and a final quatrain, again spoken in the voice of the Haitian workers. The two villanesque refrains play in variations of the two phrases “a parrot imitating spring” of the first line, and “out of swamp the cane appears” of the final line of the first tercet. Having followed language in the creative act of the poem, finding her subject tangled in itself, in the debasement of language, Dove cannot fulfill her initial desire to write within the conventions of the villanelle and the sestina. In the attempted villanelle “*The Cane Fields*” the form acts out

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<sup>37</sup> According to Dove, based on the research she did for the poem, “gnawing sugarcane can erode your teeth to sharp points” and “the French Creole spoken by the Haitians... rendered their “R’s” softly guttural, incapable of fluttering at the tip of the tongue” (Pack & Parini, 81 and 79 respectively).

<sup>38</sup> *Poetic Meter and Form* 154-5.

Dove's unease as poet with the subject she is exploring within the form. When the opening line of the poem and first tercet of the villanelle-attempted section repeats in its traditional sixth, twelfth, and eighteenth lines, it does so with variations that jar the "meditative" quality of "speculation" which John Hollander says poets who use the form continue to be drawn to.<sup>39</sup> In both this section and the second, the formal structures gone awry represent Dove's meditation on the debasement of language being jarred awry by where the language leads her.

The first villanellesque refrain, "There is a parrot imitating spring," of the first line remains open, having no end punctuation, drawing a reader on to the next line, further into the poem. The refrain becomes in the sixth line a disjointed "there is. Like a parrot imitating spring," wherein confusion and a sense of something gone awry completely displace the mystery the reader is beckoned onward to discover, possibly with pleasure, in the first line. In the twelfth line it is declarative, certain, finalized in its period end punctuation: "There is a parrot imitating spring." By the eighteenth line, with the sestina-attempt of the "*The Palace*" still ahead in the poem and the origins of perversion not yet revealed, "there is a parrot imitating spring." This is a line open to what comes before, directly at the end of the seventeenth line: "For every drop of blood," and in all of the section preceding it. For every line of "a parrot imitating spring," there is a "drop of blood," a stain upon every such line, the stain of unnatural death by human violence, enacted through the poem's inability to maintain its traditional design form.

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<sup>39</sup> *Rhyme's Reason* 40.

The third line of the first tercet of "*The Cane Fields*"—"Out of the swamp the cane appears"—also beckons the reader along toward the rest of this section of the poem. It begins the poem's descent into horror. The movement of the cane produces a more ominous sense of perversion of the natural than the "parrot imitating spring," which might have signaled a whimsical or fantastical unfolding within the poem. The cane's origin is a swamp, a murky body of water wherein lucidity is an oxymoron. It comes "to haunt" the workers, as the fourth line reveals. By the end of the third tercet, in the ninth refrain line,— "out of the swamp, the cane appears"—language has become part of the workers' continuum of horror. In the first line of this stanza, the workers "lie down screaming"; at the end of its second line, the workers announce the reason for this—"We cannot speak an R—" and the dash punctuation links the refrain to the unspeakable death. By the fifteenth line, the refrain is "out of the swamp. The cane appears" and the general's perversion of language is linked with the swamp as it is his "teeth shining/out of the swamp" in this line. The conflation of the cane and the general is complete, both threatening, life threatening for the cane workers. By the nineteenth line, "Out of the swamp the cane appears." Here at the end of its stanzaic and villanellesque journey throughout the section, the refrain imbricates into its language all the accreted associations of the various images of the section. From its opening into the section from the third line, to this point, the final line of the ending quatrain, it has moved to a formal declaration of itself, and has become for the first time a sufficient single sentence, sufficient to embody all the perversion and horror within "*The Cane Fields*."

The villanelle rhyme scheme breaks down at the outset in "*The Cane Fields*." The "spring" sound that ends the first line of the first tercet repeats itself only once in three of the following four tercets, (dropping one traditional villanellesque rhyme in those three stanzas and omitting the two traditional rhymes off the opening line in the fourth tercet stanza), and twice instead of three times in the final quatrain. Twice "spring" is rhymed with different words, "shining" in the middle line of the fifth tercet, "streaming" in the first line of the quatrain, both echoes of the "screaming" mid-line of the workers being slaughtered, emphasizing the horror of the slaughter. While "shining" is by itself a word indicating light and therein many affirmative associations, it is linked to the general's teeth and thus to the debasement enacted throughout this section. There are no other rhymes in the section, each other line ending with a new, unique sound. Thus the first section of the poem abandons almost completely the traditional mnemonic function of rhyme except in the refrain lines, lines which repeat over and over images emblematic of the perversions the poem renders.

The first section and the whole poem nonetheless enact an organic sound form, what Dove calls "the sound cage of the poem."<sup>40</sup> The depleted rhyme scheme and the contortions of the refrain scheme play their part in this enactment. The various repeated *Rs*, replete in every line—from the letter *R* that is the arbitrary reason for the slaughter of the workers, to those of the "parrot," "spring," "parsley," "green," "appears," "El General," "word," "world," "screaming," "rain," "*perejil*," "children," "arrowheads," "dreams," "streaming," "drop," among others—sound out, alongside the other language components

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<sup>40</sup> Rubin and Ingersoll 231.

of which they are part, an ominous, murmurous undercurrent, associated with murder. Dove characterizes the sound as “a kind of a growl...even in English, a subdued growl I suppose in American English.”<sup>41</sup> The horror the poem enacts in the slaughter of twenty thousand workers who cannot articulate the *r* in *perejil* is caught and sounded out in part through the imprisonment and containment of its language. In the continuous murmur of the murderous *rs* is the sound form—the “sound cage,” the poem creates out of its maker’s initial villanelle design the debasement of “the bliss of unfolding” Dove says engages her as a poetic practice. (The poem “Dusting,” on the other hand, fully represents following the affirmative unfolding of language along “an edge that needs to be explored, the edge between being unconscious and then suddenly being so aware that the skin tingles.”<sup>42</sup>)

In one sense the last line of the poem, set off as a single stanza: “for a single, beautiful word,” can be read by itself as an epiphanic, suggestive, opening outward gesture, and thus a gesture of belief in the affirmative powers of language. Yet it comes at the end of the failed sestina-attempt, the second section of a poem detailing the nature and effects of debased language; it represents the inability once again of the poem’s language to follow traditional form since a sestina ends with a tercet *envoi* stanza. The skin chills rather than tingles at the awareness of what the poem has explored, discovered, and enacted—the debasement of language, of “a single, beautiful word.” There are almost no traces of a sestina form at all in “*The Palace*.” The sestina’s traditional six sestet, final tercet composition is not discernible in the four-seven line, three eight-line, and the final one-line,

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<sup>41</sup> Rubin and Ingersoll 231.

<sup>42</sup> Schneider 122.

stanza progression of the general's section. Certain of the first stanza end words are repeated within lines throughout the section; "general," as the end word of the last line of this stanza is the only repeated end line word recurring at the end of another line in the poem and it is repeated only once. In this section, every possible opening for a transformative response to mother loss on the part of the general is turned away from, rather than embraced. This is in keen contrast to a fully realized sestina written by Elizabeth Bishop, which I believe is one of the poetic influences informing "Parsley."

In Bishop's "Sestina," there is also the theme of parental loss. It is a poem of lyrical, deep sadness, and, to use contemporary phrasing, of the art of healing. Bishop brilliantly uses the formal sestina repetition of the end line words to detail the effects of such loss, its continual return to one in various ways, and the ways in which that return may be transformed through creative acts, such as the pictures the child in the poem draws, and the tea the grandmother makes. Bishop also has a villanelle titled "One Art," about the art of accepting loss. In "*The Cane Fields*," Dove's villanelle attempt, one finds the perversion of language leading to the debasement of human life, rather than the celebration of the ways in which the human spirit can prevail through loss; "One Art" is in part the celebration of the fact and act of the latter.

Dove says in a conversation with Steven Bellin about her literary influences: "Elizabeth Bishop is someone I can't read if I intend to write that day," because "[s]he's so completely her own,"<sup>43</sup> referring it appears, from the context of the conversation, and from the fact of Dove's own work, to Bishop's unique formal genius. Dove seems to have been

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<sup>43</sup> "An Interview With Rita Dove" 17.



influenced strongly, however, by some of Bishop's themes. Certainly this is most apparent in the evocative "Genetic Expedition," in Dove's fourth book, *Grace Notes*, which is clearly a call and response to Bishop's "In the Waiting Room." Bishop's influence in terms of the themes and the particular poetic forms in which they reside in "One Art" and "Sestina" marks "Parsley." Since "Genetic Expedition," (in which Bishop's influence on Dove is so clearly one of which she is conscious), was not yet written at the time she wrote "Parsley," I would say that the influence was unconscious at the time for Dove. In the same conversation with Bellin, she also remarks, "My list of influences is constantly changing: as soon as I become aware of their influence, it means that I'm no longer being influenced by them." When she lists for Bellin some of the poets she returns to "again and again for sustenance," she says "I read them, shake my head and wonder, 'How do they do that?'," illustrating the depth of passion for poetic practice she pronounces with her "Language is everything" assertion.<sup>44</sup>

In "Parsley"'s failed sestina-attempt section, "*The Palace*," the general, who "[e]ver since the morning/his mother collapsed in the kitchen/while baking skull-shaped candies/for the Day of the Dead.../has hated sweets," feeds his parrot pastries. Having recalled planting his mother's walking cane on her grave, how "it flowered, each spring stolidly forming/four-star blossoms," he "stomps to/her room in the palace, the one without/curtains, the one with a parrot/in a brass ring." There he muses on his mother, the workers, death, the death sentence *R* of his "chosen" word: "parsley." The general can no longer abide the sweetness he associates with his mother. He separates himself from any

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<sup>44</sup> "An Interview With Rita Dove" 17. It is in her 1986 interview with Judith Kitchen and Stan Sanvel Rubin that Dove makes her "Language is everything" statement (237).

such association with someone he loved, perhaps the only person he has ever loved. He is able only to provide such sweetness, now hated and thus perverted, to something not human, to the parrot, an exotic, colonized possession. The parrot is enclosed within a brass ring in a palace away from its natural environment, a prize the general ordered for himself “all the way from Australia,” the prize ring to reach for on his ride on the merry-go-round of perverted grief whenever his grief becomes unbearable, whenever the “little knot of screams” forms in the general’s throat.

The second line of the general’s section in the poem is “It is fall, when thoughts turn/to love and death....” Death is the stand-in for love in the general’s world; they are one and the same. He is not capable of the healing, affirmative gesture toward death that he remembers his mother making the day she died, baking for the annual, celebratory and affirmative commemoration of and holiday for the dead. Separation from affirmation and celebration of the life of the dead has led to perverted expression of grief. Each spring, the potentially healing and commemorative gesture of planting on a grave generates a perversion of spring’s usual regeneration. From his mother’s cane come forth “stolidly... /four-star blossoms,” militaristically resonant, fitting emblems of the general’s grief perversion. In the “planted... walking cane,” the refrain of the workers’ section—“out of the swamp the cane appears”—picks up its first direct poetic association with mother death. Mother loss becomes associated with a perversion of spring, which yields regenerative blossoms exuberantly rather than “stolidly,” the emotive term Dove uses to characterize the blooming of the mother’s cane.

The antidote to grief the general seizes upon in "*The Palace*" yields the perversions of "*The Cane Fields*." Perversion and debasement of language—which result in death and in disconnection from the transformative, affirmative powers of language—is the antidote. There is a "little knot of screams" in his throat that is stilled when "he wonders/Who can I kill today." The "screams" of his grief remain unarticulated and are instead perverted through the use of language to kill others. The workers cannot parrot the Spanish *r* and are thus sentenced to death. The general "hears/the Haitians sing without R's/.../*Katalina*, they sing, *Katalina*,//*mi madle, mi amol en muelle*...." This is the only language in the general's section that is not debase—the only language sequencing in which the "sound cage" of murderous *rs* is absent. When the general's thoughts are expressed in the second section, *his* section, they are not in his native Spanish, but in English: "parsley" versus the "*perejil*" of the first section, the workers' section; "*My mother, my love in death*," versus the workers' voices "*mi madle, mi amol en muelle*" rising in song in their and the general's sections. In this way also Dove uses the language in her poem to represent the general's estrangement and disconnection from even his native language. In "*The Palace*," El General, having chosen the debasement of language, is cut off from the life of language, as from life itself. Even in death, in "*The Cane Fields*," the workers, who have remained connected to their native tongue in a foreign language, are capable of the regeneration into life of "com[ing] up green" a la Whitman.

To make language sing is the aim of the poet. The general in "Parsley" is not only separated from the affirmative uses of language, his own loss and all human connection, he is also separated from the music of language, from song, which the cane workers *are*

capable of generating. When “[s]omeone/calls out his name in a voice/so like his mother’s, a startled tear/splashes the tip of his right boot.” Vendler characterizes Dove’s poetic imagination as “extrapolative, montage-like and relational” and asserts that some sort of “idiosyncratic associative process lies behind most of Dove’s poems.”<sup>45</sup> “Parsley” exemplifies such qualities. In this moment in the penultimate stanza of “Parsley” the general expresses his grief in a humane way; it is the only moment in the poem in which this occurs. It is connected however to another moment earlier in “*The Palace*” section when El General feels “[t]he knot in his throat start[ing] to twitch.” He recalls seeing “his boots the first day in battle/splashed with mud and urine/as a soldier falls at his feet amazed—/how stupid he looked!—at the sound/of artillery. *I never thought it would sing*/the soldier said, and died....” The tear and death are tandem images, connected by the image of the general’s boots. It is when the general “wonders/Who can I kill today” that “...for a moment/the little knot of screams is still.”

When Stan Sanvel Rubin asks Dove whether she’s “worried at all that you create a Trujillo so fully that even though he’s a monster he’s not beyond us, but in fact becomes human on some level, with thoughts and memories?,” she replies:

No, I’m not really afraid. I’m not quite sure what you mean by *afraid*—afraid of bringing that out in me, or afraid of making him too human? But either way, I believe all of us have inside us the capacity for violence and cruelty. ...If you ignore it, it’s far too easy to be seduced into it later. ...It was important to me to try to understand that arbitrary quality of his cruelty. ...Making us get into his head may shock us all into seeing what the human being is capable of, and what in fact we’re capable of, because if we can go that far into his head, we’re halfway there ourselves.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Identity Markers” 385 and 386 respectively.

<sup>46</sup> Rubin and Ingersoll 232.

This is the debased mix the poet-tongue tastes in “Parsley”—what the human being is capable of, that is human, that is against song and poetry. In the montage of associative images within “*The Palace*,” in a perversion of both grief and song, the general’s grief is associated with the singing artillery a dying, “stupid” looking soldier hears.

“Parsley” is situated as the last poem in *Museum* and may be read as an anti-*ars poetica* poem. “O,” identified as an *ars poetica* poem by Dove,<sup>47</sup> is the last poem in *The Yellow House on the Corner*. In contrast to “Parsley,” the transformative, creative powers of language are the subject of that poem. The parallel placement of these poems is surely not arbitrary, given Dove’s close attention to all matters of poetic form, including the sequencing of poems, as her use of “Dusting” in this volume as well as in *Thomas and Beulah* indicate, as her reading instructions at the beginning of *Thomas and Beulah* illustrate.<sup>48</sup> In “Parsley” cruel, arbitrary slaughter comes through “a single, beautiful word.” “O,” as Dove herself says, “delights in the very rightness of a single word—in this case a word that is a single letter—and in doing so tries to sing a paean to language at its most provocative.”<sup>49</sup>

“Parsley” is Dove’s cautionary commentary on the power of language, the ways in which the uses of language can be used against the values of openness, inclusiveness, and against the truth of the world and the world of others as she experiences it and represents it in her poetry. As the workers note in “*The Cane Fields*,” the general is “all the world,” for

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<sup>47</sup> Walsh, “Isn’t Reality Magic?: An Interview with Rita Dove” 150.

<sup>48</sup> On the dedication page of this book is the instruction: “These poems tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence.”

<sup>49</sup> Prins & Shreiber 112.

himself, and tragically, for the workers. It is this disconnection and distance from the rest of the world, from others who people his world, from his own feelings, that constitutes the origins of the general's perversions. Dove details a more benign form of this disconnection and distance in both "Boccaccio: The Plague Years" and "Anti-Father" and finds that neither Boccaccio nor the father has a fully formed Levertovian "imagination's tongue" for tasting and seeing the world that is "if anything all that lives." Dove clearly does have such a tongue in her poetry. "Parsley" is her most disturbing and vibrant example of this. In "Parsley" she does "taste and see" "grief, mercy, language,/ tangerine/weather..."; she does "breathe...,bite/savor, chew, swallow, transform//into our flesh our/deaths...." In her essay "Writing 'Parsley'," she says: "I had always felt that Evil was some monstrous but essentially alien power; I had not counted on Evil being... interesting."<sup>50</sup> Her poetic openness to and exploration of the alien Other—Evil—in "Parsley" demonstrates her ability to remain connected, unlike the General, to even the most frightening elements of human experience. The poem brings her to a debased and perverted taste of "grief, mercy, language,/ tangerine/weather...." "Mercy" and "language" are debased. "Weather" is debased in the "rain punch[ing] through" the slaughtered workers in "*The Cane Fields*." "Tangerine" is debased in the form of the natural green beauty of the parrot being transformed into "a parody/of greenery," and of the perversion of pastries as the "hated sweets." Only "grief" is not completely debased because the poem allows the cane workers their voice.

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<sup>50</sup> Pack & Parini 79.

I have said in my discussion of the last line of the poem—"for a single, beautiful word"—that it cannot be read as an affirmative gesture within the poem regarding the power of language. However, I do believe that it can be read as such a gesture in the context of the whole volume of poetry it concludes. In an earlier poem in *Museum*, "Reading Holderlin on the Patio With the Aid of a Dictionary" (32), Dove writes in the last half of the poem: "The meaning surfaces//comes to me aslant and/I go to meet it, stepping/out of my body/word for word, until I am//everything at once: the perfume/of the world in which/I go under,/a skindiver/remembers air" (32).<sup>51</sup> This is the poetic principle I read at work finally in the last line of "Parsley" as it takes its place simultaneously as the last line of *Museum*. She has met the surfacing meaning of the poems in the book, even the horrific meaning she explores in "Parsley." In that poem she remains "everything at once: the perfume/of the world," even as she goes under in such a poem, skindiving through the water to the wreck of misused language, all the while "remembering air," savoring, for all the experience brings her, "if anything all that lives."

This impulse in "Parsley," in Dove's poetic exploration at large in *Museum*, is what also fuels her inclusiveness regarding the traditions she chooses to "taste and see," to "steal and plunder," in writing her poetry. Returning to Tolson, I quote the passage in *Harlem*

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<sup>51</sup> I find these lines to be resonant of Adrienne Rich's poem, "Diving into the Wreck," in which Rich details her own poetic project: "I came to explore the wreck./The words are purposes./The words are maps./I came to see the damage that was done/and the treasures that prevail./.../the thing I came for:/the wreck and not the story of the wreck/the thing itself and not the myth/.../the evidence of damage/.../And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair/streams black, the merman in his armored body/.../.../I am she: I am he//We are, I am, you are/by cowardice or courage/the one who find our way/back to this scene/carrying a knife, a camera/a book of myths/in which/our names do not appear" (*Diving into the Wreck* 23-4). I find Rich's lines to be particularly resonant of Dove's project in "Parsley," in which the cane workers' voices finally appear in the story of Trujillo's slaughter of them.

*Gallery* in which the Curator provides an anecdote regarding the Harlemite Mister Starks

(“hailed from Onward, Mississippi”), his mother, and his first name “Mister”:

When he was four years old,  
his black mother took him to  
the Big House on an *ante-bellum* estate;  
and the Lady wanted to know the baby’s name  
and the proud mother said “Mister.”  
Since every Negro male in Dixie was  
either a *boy* or an *uncle*,  
the mistress turned blue and hot  
like an arc-welder’s torch.  
“A pickaninny named *Mister*?” the old doll hissed;  
and the maid, slamming the mop bucket down,  
screamed: “Miss Leta,  
it’s *my* baby and I can name it  
any damn thing I please!”<sup>52</sup>

Any critics or peer poets who find troubling the Black, female, American poet Rita Dove choosing traditional poetic forms, or traditional Western cultural figures, as appropriate material for her work as poet are well advised to consider Mister Starks’s mother’s position here. After all, *Museum* is Dove’s book and the poetry in it is her poetry. In the well-ensconced American poetic tradition of resistance to tyranny of any sort, Dove asserts in this volume that she can and will write the poetry she pleases, can and will determine the poetic material suitable to her work for herself. Whitman, Muske, Simic, Levertov, Tolson, and scores of other American poets would agree.

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<sup>52</sup> “Rho” 104.



## CHAPTER III

### *THOMAS AND BEULAH*

The gestures of the individuals are not history; but they are images of history.

—Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 1949

The pattern of the genes is biological, is chemical, is human history. Naming is cultural, also history, another pattern.

—A.S. Byatt, *Still Life*, 1985

my girls/my girls/my almost me//i command you to be/good runners/to go with grace/go  
well in the dark and/make for high ground/my dearest girls/my girls/my more than me.

—Lucille Clifton, “Last Note to My Girls,” 1974

Having explored in *Museum*—and claimed—her relationship to any of the whole of received Western poetic and cultural traditions that she so chose, in her next book, the Pulitzer Prize winning *Thomas and Beulah*,<sup>1</sup> Rita Dove now explores various parts of received familial traditions as poetic subject, inspiration, source, and practice. In the poet’s own words, the book’s subject is “...the story of a Black couple growing up in the industrial Midwest from about 1900 to 1960.”<sup>2</sup> On the book’s dedication page, Dove places in boldface a description of the book and reading instructions: “These poems tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence” (5). Divided into two sections—first Thomas’s—“Mandolin,” comprised of twenty-three poems, and then Beulah’s—“Canary in Bloom,” comprised of twenty-one, the book takes the form of a poem sequence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Published in 1986, it was awarded the Pulitzer in 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Dove in Rubin & Ingersoll 236.

<sup>3</sup> Dove says in her interview with Steven Schneider that “...the poems make the most sense when read in order. But even though some of the poems are absolutely dependent on others, in the writing I was still trying very hard to make each poem wholly self-sufficient, or a piece. In other words, a particular poem may be dependent on an earlier poem for its maximum meaning, but in itself it is a complete poem” (117).

“Mandolin” starts with a poem about Thomas’s riverboat travel as a young adult North from Tennessee, which he leaves in 1919; devotes twenty-one poems to documenting his work life and his courtship, marriage, and family life with Beulah, in Akron, Ohio, where he settles in 1921 two years after leaving Tennessee; and ends with a poem that details Thomas’s moment of death in 1963. “Canary in Bloom” begins with two poems about Beulah’s childhood experiences in Akron, where her family had migrated from Georgia in 1906 when she was about two; proceeds through the next eighteen poems documenting her experiences of courtship, marriage, and family life with Thomas and their four daughters, her domestic and work life. It parallels “Mandolin” in ending with a poem that details Beulah’s moment of death in 1969. This narrative sequence of lyric poems strings together, in Dove’s words, “the moments that matter most in our lives,” those “we remember as beads on a necklace, moments that matter to us, come to us in flashes, and the connections are submerged.”<sup>4</sup>

In *Yellow House* and *Museum* Dove wrote poems of such moments in the lives of both ordinary people and figures documented in the culturally valorized encyclopedia of History. Both books contained poems about family, some of those about Dove’s family specifically. The exclusive focus of the poems in *Thomas and Beulah* is the personal experience of “small people” and those “small people” are her grandparents. Dove tells Judith Kitchen in 1986, just before *Thomas and Beulah* was to be published :

*Thomas and Beulah* is based very loosely on my grandparents’ lives. My grandmother had told me a story that had happened to my grandfather when he was young, coming up on a riverboat to Akron, Ohio, my hometown. But that was all I had basically. And the story so fascinated me that I tried to write about it. I started off writing stories about my grandfather, and soon, because I ran out of real facts, in order to keep going, I made up the facts for this character, Thomas. ...I’m always fascinated with seeing a story from different angles. But also in the two sequences I’m not interested in the *big* moments. Obviously some *big* things happened in those years. I wasn’t interested in portraying them, those moments. I was interested in the thoughts, the things which were concerning these small people, these

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<sup>4</sup> Dove in Schneider 119.

nobodies in the course of history. For instance, there's a reference in one of the last poems of Beulah's to the March on Washington, but it's a very oblique reference. She's much more concerned about the picnic she's at. I've added a chronology to the end of the book. I never thought I'd do this in my life, but I did a chronology from 1900 to 1960. It's a very eccentric chronology, but you can see what was happening in the social structure of Midwest America at the time this couple was growing up. (235-36)

As a complete volume of poetry devoted to the “nobodies in the course of history” and their quotidian realities and concerns, in tandem with Dove’s relegation of culturally forefronted History to the “Chronology” at the back of the book, *Thomas and Beulah* deepens and expands Dove’s already present voice within that strand of poetics which speaks to the relationship between History and Poetry. It is part of “the grand conversation,” which includes the voices of poets as diverse in their poetic practices as Sidney, Whitman, Rukeyser, and Dove; and which Dove says “an extended family of writers past, present and future” participates in.<sup>5</sup> The book ultimately asserts that her maternal grandparents prepared the way—literally and literally<sup>6</sup>—for Dove to participate in that conversation.

Helen Vendler ascribes to *Thomas and Beulah* a position in twentieth-century American poetry as the “first extended poem” of the Great Migration. In noting that Dove’s grandparents’ story is in part that of a “great social movement—one of the most important for American history,”<sup>7</sup> Vendler calls attention to the book’s concern with what Dove calls “the Grand Chronicle” of History.<sup>8</sup> While the history of her maternal grandparents’ lives in *Thomas and Beulah* is not strictly or solely the “real facts” of their personal lives, Dove does not eschew “real” historical components as context for the kind of truth she’s interested in in her grandparents’ lives; she did historical research for the book. She tells

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<sup>5</sup> Bellin 32.

<sup>6</sup> In her essay, “Divided Loyalties: Literal and Literary in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song and Rita Dove,” Patricia Wallace addresses the conflation of the literal and the literary in *Thomas and Beulah*, although not in terms of progeniture.

<sup>7</sup> “Louise Gluck, Stephen Dunn, Brad Leithauser, Rita Dove” 448-9.

<sup>8</sup> Schneider 112.

Steven Schneider that when she began the Thomas poems, “I wanted to understand my grandfather more.... To do that... I had to get to know the town he lived in. What was Akron, Ohio like in the ‘20s & ‘30s? It was different from the Akron I knew. That meant ...researching to try to get a sense of that period of time in the industrial Midwest.”<sup>9</sup>

At the same time that Dove affirms the significance of historical facts and events in her grandparents’ lives, her research for the book led her to a keen awareness of its limitations:

I began to understand that history isn't merely facts & isolated events to be memorized, but that it is lived through people. Trying to fit my own history, and the history of my race & gender, into the Grand Chronicle—History with a capital *H*—led me to the realization that the underside of History, as it were, was infinitely more interesting. So in my work I make a conscious effort to treat History & history equally.<sup>10</sup>

Thus the “very eccentric chronology” Dove places at the end of the book is an olio of history and History. It lists dates from family history, national history, and family history as it intersects with national historical events. The family history includes the births and deaths of Thomas and Beulah; the dates of their arrivals in Akron, wedding, children’s births and marriages; of a “trip to Tennessee,” a move to “Bishop Street,” onsets of health problems, and various jobs. —In 1934, Thomas gets “[p]art-time work cleaning offices of the Satisfaction Coal Company. —In 1946, Beulah begins “...a part-time job in Charlotte’s Dress Shoppe” and in 1950, she “takes up millinery” (78-79). The national history—from 1900 when Thomas is born through 1969 when Beulah dies—is covered through such entries as:

1916: 30,000 workers migrate to Akron.  
1929: The Goodyear Zeppelin Airdock is built—the largest building in the world without interior supports.  
1940: 11,000 Negroes living in Akron (total population: 243,000)  
1963: August: The March on Washington. (78-79)

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<sup>9</sup> Schneider 112.

<sup>10</sup> Schneider 112.

Some of the entries that note family history as it intersects with national historical events are:

1930: Lose car due to The Depression. Second child born (Agnes).  
1942: Thomas employed at Goodyear Aircraft in war relief work.  
1945: Rose marries a war veteran (78-79).

The distinctions I make here regarding categories of family history and national history should not be confused with an actual separation between the two. I have provided information as it appeared on the page, but am mindful to read between the lines separating the various entries. If, as Dove says, “we remember as beads on a necklace,” then the chronology must be read for “the connections ...submerged”<sup>11</sup> between both its family and national history entries since memory is what informs and forms both, History being culturally institutionalized memory.

The “Chronology” is significant not only because it reaffirms the relationship between history and History, family history and national, (one of Dove’s continuous themes), in a form she has not used before—the chronology she tells Kitchen “I never thought I’d do... in my life, but I did....” It also, when read in concert with the epigraphs Dove chooses for “Mandolin” and “Canary in Bloom,” amplifies that theme to include the relationship between family history and poetic tradition. Lines from Tolson’s *Harlem Gallery*—“Black Boy, O Black Boy,/is the port worth the cruise?”—serve as epigraph to Thomas’s “Mandolin” (9). Lines from Anne Spencer’s “Lines to a Nasturtium”—“Ah, how the senses flood at my repeating/As once in her fire-lit heart I felt the furies/Beating, beating”—as epigraph to Beulah’s “Canary in Bloom” (45). Thomas and Beulah could have had Tolson’s books on their bookshelves—Thomas’s poem “Roast Possum” indicates bookshelves in their living room—or some of the magazines, journals, or anthologies Spencer’s poetry was published in. Spencer and Tolson were writing and publishing their poetry during the time span of the book, from the turn of the century up

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<sup>11</sup> Cavalieri 11.

through the nineteen sixties—Spencer as a poet associated with the Harlem Renaissance, Tolson as a poet of the next generation, and one who wrote his master’s thesis on the Harlem Renaissance writers.<sup>12</sup> It is of course no surprise that for a book on poetic progenitors Dove would choose Tolson as the opening voice, he who so early on in his career declared the value of studying poetic progenitors. Dove provides the chronology, because *Thomas and Beulah* required it for full poetic resonance. The epigraphs, a standard feature of Dove’s volumes of poetry after *Yellow House*, she provides for the same reason. In another assertion that addresses the same poetic dynamic as her necklace analogy, Dove says that “...it’s what happens between the words that matters; so much happens in the leaps, the silences.”<sup>13</sup> In what happens between the words of the chronology and the two epigraph selections (two formal elements set apart from the poems in the book and thus given a distinct relationship to each other, as well as to the poems), American history, poetic tradition and the family mesh.

Dove frequently speaks to and writes about the close connection between poetry and the familial life. Her introduction to her 1993 *Selected Poems* ends with “In the Old Neighborhood,” a poem not published in any of her volumes of poetry. It serves as epigraph to this collection of her first three volumes, of which *Thomas and Beulah* is the last. The introduction constitutes a sort of poet’s autobiography of events and influences—of poetic origins—as Dove answers the question that must compete for most-oft asked question of a writer: “‘What made you want to be a writer?’” (xix). At the end of the introduction, as preface to the poem, Dove says that the “mystery of destiny” generally, and specifically as it brought her to being a poet, “boils down to the ultimate—and ultimately unanswerable—questions: How does where I come from determine where I’ve ended up? Why am I what I am and not what I thought I’d be? What did I think I’d be?

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<sup>12</sup> Andrews, Foster, and Harris 732.

<sup>13</sup> Bellin 27.

Where do I reside most completely?” (xxi). She goes on to say that one of the things she does from “time to time in her poetry” is to “sidle up to the answers, to eavesdrop on the gods” (xix). Having noted that often she tries her poet sidling and eavesdropping by “reach[ing] back to childhood,” Dove tells her readers: “I found myself writing a poem about the old neighborhood,” during the “unexpected but exhilarating turmoil” of the spring of 1993 when she accepted the Poet Laureate of the United States position (xix). “The old neighborhood” turns out to be Dove’s childhood family home—its house and yard. (Also tellingly indicative of how the family and poetry are entwined for Dove at this time in her career, “house and yard” becomes the title of the first part of Dove’s first Poet Laureate lecture, “stepping out: the poet in the world,” delivered in May of 1994.)<sup>14</sup>

A return to familial history in her poetry at the time of her appointment to the Poet Laureateship is not a surprising move for the poet who wrote *Thomas and Beulah*, and says that in her family “[t]here was that first generation sense of responsibility, when you know you’re expected to carry that earned respect a little further along the line.”<sup>15</sup> Both Dove’s Poet Laureateship and her Pulitzer Prize for the book about her familial origins carry further “that earned respect.” In the interview in which she discusses this familial expectation, she refers back to her maternal grandparents and clearly identifies them as along the line of “earned respect” that she honors and extends.<sup>16</sup> While both *Yellow House on the Corner* and *Museum* contain poems reaching back to Dove’s childhood family experiences, it is in *Thomas and Beulah* that Dove creates her first sustained sequence centering on familial poetic origins.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Not coincidentally, her grandparents and the book *Thomas and Beulah* figure in both Dove’s second Laureate address, “‘a handful of inwardness’: the world in the poet,” delivered in October 1994, and the “autobiography” essay that is the last section of *the poet’s world*.

<sup>15</sup> Walsh 145. Dove refers here to being “a first-generation middle-class black child.”

<sup>16</sup> Walsh 145.

<sup>17</sup> Dove tells Steven Schneider that “*Thomas and Beulah* is the first sustained effort at a sequence” dealing with some of the themes of individual lives she had been trying to explore in her first two books (119).

“In the Old Neighborhood” provides an instructive reading of the position Dove takes in *Thomas and Beulah*. A familial event, a sister’s wedding, for which she is “matron of honor,” occasions “the daughter, home from the wide world... join[ing] her mother” in “In the Old Neighbor” (xxv). In the “house and yard” part of her May 1994 Laureate address Dove quotes lines from the poem. She discusses the representation of various places (such as Akron, Ohio, (her hometown and the location for all but one, the first, of the poems in *Thomas and Beulah*), front and back yards, various rooms in the house)) in her poems. At one point in the lecture she comes to the kitchen, which brings her to the poem, “In the Old Neighborhood”:

The kitchen is a place for conversation, for social intercourse, for oral history; a place to return to again and again, a place where the daughter, home from the wide world, can join her mother as I did in my poem in “In the Old Neighborhood” and “Lean at the sink, listen to her chatter/while the pressure cooker ticks/*whole again whole again now.*” (27)

Dove describes herself here as poet daughter who leans at the sink listening to mother-chatter. When Dove was writing *Thomas and Beulah* she called her mother weekly as part of her research for this book about her mother’s parents. Dove tells Steven Schneider: “I talked to my mother an awful lot about what it was like growing up at that time. ...I didn’t know what I wanted to hear. I just wanted her to talk, and that’s what she did. I amassed so much material...” (116). In her “autobiography” essay at the end of *the poet’s world* she says of her mother: “Her implicit trust, her faith that I would do justice to their lives, was the most positive force I experienced while writing the book” (97). Dove’s mother is a source of poetic energy, fueling the poetry Dove is writing through mother trust.<sup>18</sup> The

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*Mother Love*, her fifth book of poetry, is her only other book-length sequence—a sonnet sequence—to date. It too explores the complex relationship between family and poetic tradition for Dove, although in a markedly different formal and conceptual approach from the one she takes in *Thomas and Beulah*.

<sup>18</sup> Mother trust becomes an important element within the sonnet sequence of *Mother Love*, published in 1995, nine years after *Thomas and Beulah* comes out, suggesting once again, in the context of Dove’s comments here about her mother’s trust, that the familial maternal line constitutes a continuously present poetic influence and source for Dove.



dedication page of *Thomas and Beulah* reads “for my mother, *Elvira Elizabeth*” (5), in a return to her mother of all that amassed material, mother-chatter infused—in the form of a poem sequence.

The image of poet daughter at the mother sink’s in “In the Old Neighborhood” leads to the image of Dove the poet granddaughter who leans also at the sink of her familial and poetic origins, and listens to familial and poetic chatter while the poetic composition pressure cooker of writing ticks out *Thomas and Beulah*. In the first part of “In the Old Neighborhood,” Dove describes what various members of the household, including herself, are doing on the day before the wedding. Reading the newspaper and doing the crossword puzzle (as her mother “works up a sudsbath/of worries” (xxii) regarding the wedding, her father worries over his roses,<sup>19</sup> and her “brother rummages upstairs” (xxiii)), the poet “home from the wide world”<sup>20</sup> wanders in her mind, “reach[ing] back to childhood,” as she says in her comments on the poem.<sup>21</sup> One of her reveries precipitates itself out of Dove recalling that she’s “read every book in this house” (xxiii). She then makes what I consider a classic Dovian move that bespeaks her amplification of legitimate poetic subjects, her “O Taste and See” impulses. And provides an answer to Dove’s question, “How does where I come from determine where I’ve ended up?”—the family. She recalls some of those books and the food she ate while reading each despite the parental admonition not to do so (“(don’t eat with your nose in a book!)”): for *Romeo and Juliet* “...crumbling saltines/.../and the gritty slick of sardines”; “For a premature attempt at *The Iliad*/stuffed green olives”; for Brenda Starr “[c]andy buttons”; for *King Lear* Fig Newtons; for the Justice League of America ““Bazooka bubble gum”; and finally, for

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<sup>19</sup> His passion for rose cultivation was the subject of two poems in the “My Father’s Telescope” section of *Museum*.

<sup>20</sup> As she notes, Dove writes this poem “in the middle of the unexpected but exhilarating turmoil” of the spring of 1993 when she was named Poet Laureate.

<sup>21</sup> *Selected Poems* xxi.

*Macbeth* “dry bread” (xxiii). In these images Dove is poet who feeds herself equally with saltines and Shakespeare,<sup>22</sup> with family and the “wide world.” She does so because her family has provided her the poetic kitchen in which such sustenance is offered. Those books in Dove’s parents’ home have their origins in Dove’s grandparents’ home, as Thomas’s poem, “Roast Possum,” attests.

In her 1997 essay, “On Voice,” Dove describes the voice “apprenticeship” she went through, beginning with her first book of poetry, *Yellow House*, through her third, *Thomas and Beulah*. She says *Thomas and Beulah* “represents my homecoming, being a book about my grandparents, and, on a subliminal level, a book of reconciliation with my roots,” and that after writing the book, “I was free to fly in whatever direction I chose.”<sup>23</sup> Poetic achievement is ascribed to her familial lineage, not only as it informs her person, but as it informs her poet self. In her “house and yard” Laureate lecture she speaks to the subject of the poet’s voice also:

Since ...the kitchen is, spiritually speaking, the source of nourishment and intimate communion as well as the repository for folklore and affairs of the soul, to repudiate its influence is also to deny a significant aspect of one’s psychological makeup. One becomes not only cut off from one’s roots but estranged from one’s own voice. (32)

Here Dove links poetic utterance and wholeness to familial sources. In her Laureate address, ““a handful of inwardness”: the poet in the world,” Dove provides a compelling anecdote of how familial chatter at the dinner table, insisted upon by family elders—her parents—came to shape her poetic practices and values:

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<sup>22</sup> Recall that she tells Vendler in 1989, when Vendler asks her about English literary influences: “Well, Shakespeare, of course” but no one else (491).

<sup>23</sup> Prins and Shreiber 111. In Jennifer Brody’s interview, “Genre Fixing: An Interview with Rita Dove,” Dove says she “was aware of a long apprenticeship trying to get” to “writing more personal things” in *Thomas and Beulah* (10). She does not speak specifically to the subject of poetic voice there. Nonetheless I appropriate her use of the word “apprenticeship” as equally applicable to the development of voice since elsewhere she herself links the achievement in *Thomas and Beulah* of more personal, familial subjects to voice, as will be noted shortly.

When I was growing up, there were two iron-clad rules at mealtime: No reading at the dinner table, and each person had to say one thing about their day before the meal was over. We usually proceeded clockwise, starting at my father's left hand with my brother, then me, my mom, my two younger sisters, and finally, my father. I dreaded dredging up some interesting anecdote from school or orchestra practice and struggled to strike the right balance—to hit upon an event that would be interesting enough to get me off the hook without being forced to elaborate. ("Is that all that happened to you today?" my father would exclaim. "Well, I feel sorry for you. What else?")<sup>24</sup> I usually lost the struggle, but finally it became clear to me that the bout was rigged: The more I tried to avoid telling the story, the more questions I would be asked. In time, I realized that I enjoyed hearing from everyone else, which meant that they must have enjoyed hearing what I had to say, no matter how mundane I thought it sounded. I began to select the choicest details from the morass of a day's instructions, shaping it in my mind for the most succinct and entertaining delivery. Today I know that I was learning how to shape life—or, more precisely, memory. It gave me a handle on the day, a way of perceiving and grappling with my own flux. (58-9)

In "Roast Possum" (37-8), Dove tells another story of how familial chatter—her grandfather's tale-telling specifically—provides "a handle on the day, a way of perceiving and grappling with ...flux." In the poem, there is no mention of roast possum as actual meal on the table until the final three lines of the poem: "*Yessir,/we enjoyed that possum. We ate him/real slow, with sweet potatoes*" (38). The poem focuses on Thomas doing some of his storytelling to his two granddaughters and one grandson. One story involves the nature and the hunting of the possum of the title, who appears at the poem's end finally "roast."

Dove's kitchen "...of nourishment and intimate communion as well as ...repository for folklore and affairs of the soul" spills over into Thomas and Beulah's living room, the poem's setting. Here Thomas tells the tale of the roast possum, (which tale ends back in the kitchen). The first three lines of "Roast Possum" are Thomas's paraphrase of the possum entry in the "1909 Werner/Encyclopedia, three rows of deep green/along the wall": "*The*

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<sup>24</sup> Dove has her poet companions in this sort of childhood experience. John Berryman, genius of poetry of "inwardness," in number 14 of his *Dream Songs*, has his biomythographic character Henry relate the fact that "...my mother told me as a boy/(repeatedly) 'Ever to confess you're bored/means you have no//Inner Resources'" (16).

*possum's a greasy critter/that lives on persimmons and what/the Bible calls carrion*" (37).

Here Thomas and Beulah are Dove's poetic progenitors in her description of their book-replete living room,<sup>25</sup> which reappears in the next generation's house—Dove's childhood home—in "In the Old Neighborhood," wherein Dove enumerates the poet-nourishing reading of "every book" in her parents' house, a fact she also confirms as autobiographical in various interviews. Steven Bellin asks Dove how and why she became a writer and if "...there [were] experiences in your childhood that were key ones?." Dove answers: "I grew up reading; that was the first step. ...Writing was a natural next step" (10). In *Thomas and Beulah* Dove's first step toward poethood begins in the "three rows of deep green/along the wall," this book-lined environment of her maternal grandparents' home, handed down through family tradition to Dove, and of which tradition she makes poetry.

The 1909 Werner Encyclopedia of "One Volume Missing" (33) that Thomas bought at a rummage sale does not provide sufficient information, does not illuminate what Thomas knows of the possum. He goes on to "invent/embellishments" as he describes hunting the possum, aiming his inventions at his grandson—"Malcolm, little/Red Delicious," most beloved and only grandson of Thomas of the four daughter "Girl girl/girl girl" father-disappointment in his poem "Compendium" (28). (Like grandfather, granddaughter Dove takes up Thomas's practice of inventing embellishments in telling her story of her grandparents' lives, and in this poem names Thomas as her poetic progenitor in this practice.) Malcolm is attentive but skeptical. He hangs "...back, studying them/with his gold hawk eyes." His granddaughters are restless. "Thomas talked horses." The feats of "Strolling Jim" ...//...put/Wartrace..."—Thomas's Tennessee hometown—"on the map," as do Thomas's storytelling feats, as do Dove's poetic feats put it and Akron on the

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<sup>25</sup> In which Dove spent time in as a child. She tells Grace Cavalieri, "When I was in my early teens my grandfather died, and I spent Friday nights to Saturday afternoons with my grandmother, for about half a year, and so she would tell me lots of stories" (12), including of course the one about Thomas that started Dove writing this book..

American poetic map. Strolling Jim was such an extraordinary horse, Thomas claims, that he “was buried/under a stone, like a man.” Ever mindful of his audience, Thomas notes his granddaughters “liked that part.” The chronology at the end of the book suggests Dove is not one of those granddaughters.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, here, granddaughter Dove’s practice of cultural celebration and valorization of the ordinary originates in Thomas’s. Thomas renders the horse so grand as a man that he too deserves the tribute of a stone marking his life, a cultural symbol of Strolling Jim’s worth and value. Patricia Wallace notes “how entangled are the literary and literal” in *Thomas and Beulah*, discussing Beulah’s poem “Sunday Greens.”<sup>27</sup> Thomas’s “Roast Possum” exemplifies this entanglement also.

Thomas returns from Strolling Jim to the possum. Thomas the storyteller presents himself as just as mindful of “the leaps, the silences” “between the words” that Dove, his poet granddaughter, says matter so much. He thinks to himself: “He could have gone on to tell them/that the Werner admitted Negro children/to be intelligent, though briskness/clouded over at puberty, bringing/indirection and laziness.” “Instead,” Thomas goes back to the possum tale, where he fills in the leaps and silences of the Werner entry, and provides his own set of leaps and silences to be read around his tale. In the move back to the possum story at the poem’s end Thomas amplifies both the “possum” and the “Negro” entries of the encyclopedia—(of which rummage sale find in Thomas’s poem, “One Volume Missing” (37), Charles Berger says *Thomas and Beulah* is the missing volume<sup>28</sup>)—and adds a new entry—“sullin”:

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<sup>26</sup> The “Chronology” marks three grandchild births, in 1947, 1949, and 1951, the last being the birth of Malcolm, noted as “the only grandson” (79). Dove was born in 1952.

<sup>27</sup> “Divided Loyalties: Literal and Literary in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song and Rita Dove” 13.

<sup>28</sup> “The Granddaughter’s Archive: Rita Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah*” 361. Berger points out in this same passage that “...this work of reference was published in Akron, Dove’s home town, so it is nicely emblematic of the poet’s desire for the encyclopedic and the local, the global and the specific.”

*You got to be careful  
with a possum when he's on the ground;  
he'll turn on his back and play dead  
till you give up looking. That's  
what you'd call sullin'. (38)*

In another Thomas poem, "Nothing Down," Thomas, (at one point reveling expansively in how he imagines folks back home would react to the car he's buying: "How they'd all talk!"), recalls a different kind of hunt, from his Tennessee childhood days:

*Every male on the Ridge  
old enough to whistle  
was either in the woods  
or under a porch.  
He could hear the dogs  
rippling up the hill. (22)*

In *Yellow House*, the runaway slave Pamela stills to the "White quiet" as she watches those hunting her approach: "snapping the brush. They are/smiling, rifled crossed on their chests" ("Pamela" 39). Harriet Jacobs was hunted when she went into hiding.<sup>29</sup> Emmett Till was hunted down and killed in 1956 in the same decade "Roast Possum" is set.<sup>30</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Nikki Giovanni have all written poems dealing with Till's lynching. Brooks's "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till" is perhaps the most well known.<sup>31</sup> Such hunts are strewn across the American historical and literary landscape Dove works with. Family history, national history, poetry, entwine.

It is not surprising to note a connection here also between Dove and Ralph Ellison, given both their interrogations, extensions, amplifications, and transmutations of various strands of traditional Western culture. Another literary figure writing of and during one of the eras spanning Dove's grandparents' lives, Ellison joins Spencer and Tolson as yet

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<sup>29</sup> *Incidents in the Life of a Slave-Girl*.

<sup>30</sup> The poem is set before Thomas's first heart attack in 1960, detailed in "The Stroke" (39), yet years enough after Malcolm's birth in 1951, that the grandson could articulate his skepticism as he does in the poem.

<sup>31</sup> Lorde's poem that includes a section on Till is "Afterimages"; Giovanni's, "Hands: For Mother's Day."

another literary resonance in *Thomas and Beulah*—as a literary resonance infusing the lives of Thomas and Beulah, and as such, handed down to Dove from them. In “Roast Possum” Thomas passes on to his grandchildren “*old-time know-how*”: “*Man he was tough but no match/for old-time know-how.*” There is a grandfather figure in Ellison’s *Invisible Man* also, and he too passes on similar “*old-time know-how.*” On his death bed, he offers final words to his son, which his grandchildren in the room, including Ellison’s protagonist, overhear, and it sounds a lot like a version of Thomas’s “sullin” that the grandfather advises, albeit more directly stated, in a voice in which the anger is not as transmuted as in Thomas’s version:

“Son, after I’m gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.”<sup>32</sup>

Dove’s grandfather is one generation younger than the invisible man’s;<sup>33</sup> yet both speak to similar conditions—of the Jim Crow legal, social, and cultural exclusions of their times, and each from positions of DuBois’s double-consciousness. Thomas and the invisible man’s grandfather each live in a world “which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world,” as DuBois describes the gift of “Negro” “second-sight in this American world” of Jim Crow curse.<sup>34</sup>

It seems the fact that Strolling Jim, a horse, “was buried/under a stone, like a man,” leads Thomas to an association between American blacks and Strolling Jim, finally honored “like a man.”—a status disallowed American blacks through their ownership by whites’

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<sup>32</sup> 16.

<sup>33</sup> Dove’s grandfather was born in 1900 and was in his fifties at the time of the poem. Ellison’s protagonist recounts his story as an adult in the late thirties, early forties; thus his grandfather must have been born late nineteenth century. At any rate, the biographical Dove grandfather and the fictional Ellison grandfather both experienced Jim Crow America.

<sup>34</sup> “The Souls of Black Folk” 45.

during the American slavery era, and the persistent identification of blacks as inferior beings that fueled and underpinned Jim Crow institutional power. In the poem, it is after telling his grandchildren the part of Strolling Jim's story about being "buried/under a stone, like a man," that Thomas goes on to reflect to himself about whether or not to tell them what the Negro entry in Werner's says. Thomas's second-sight recognizes the representation of himself and his grandchildren in the Werner entry as DuBois's "revelation of the other world." He inserts into his possum tale the description of "sullin'" to counter "the revelation of the other world." He applies his "old-time know-how"—both experiential and historical, and literary—regarding the realities of black American experience, to the Negro entry, coming up with an affirmative tale of survival to counter its deficiencies, a tale wherein "sullin'" is a survival tactic akin to Ellison's invisible man's grandfather's.

Patricia Wallace identifies this "more intransigent lived reality" in the Thomas and Beulah poems as that which Dove wishes not to evade in "the poet's 'magic'" of "transform[ing] images and alter[ing] meaning."<sup>35</sup> I agree with Wallace's assessment of Dove's impulses in the book, and at the same time read "Roast Possum" as Dove's demonstration of how such a "more intransigent lived reality" can indeed be transformed by imagination in the service of countering and undermining its intransigence. Dove speaks to Steven Schneider about the realities Thomas and Beulah face:

We tend to forget that there were generations upon generations of black Americans who did not have the luxury of bitterness. I don't mean to suggest that there was no bitterness, just that you had enough to do with surviving. ...The civil rights movement and the rise of black consciousness in the nineteen sixties made the release of emotion—anger, elation, fury, righteousness—possible. One could get emotions out without being poisonous and so still be able to go on with life. But Thomas and Beulah came from a different generation, from an era when there was no point in talking about what white people had and black people did not. That was a fact of life—it didn't mean they liked it, it didn't mean they thought it was right. ...Inequality was a given. ...Why aren't Thomas and Beulah furious? Well, they were, but they had a different way of addressing it. (120-21)

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<sup>35</sup> 15.



For Thomas in “Roast Possum,” inequality is a “given” scripted into the Werner entry on the Negro. He knows it isn’t right and counters it with transformative “sullin”—his different way of addressing that inequality which Dove refers to.

When Malcolm expresses to his grandfather his skepticism regarding Strolling Jim—interrupting Thomas as he describes the “sullin” practice of the possum by asking, “who owned Strolling Jim,/and who paid for the tombstone”—Thomas, “as a grandfather, replied: “*Yessir/we enjoyed that possum. We ate him/real slow, with sweet potatoes,*” invoking the root vegetable staple of Black American culinary arts. Thomas transforms the possum tale from the realm of the “more intransigent lived reality” to that of Dove’s spiritual kitchen. He ends his storytelling, Dove her poem, with an image of nourishment from black American life. “As a grandfather,” he nourishes his grandchildren in the spiritual kitchen of the poem that his and Beulah’s living room has become—for granddaughter Dove as poetic heir as well as for Malcolm and the two granddaughters in the poem.

In *Thomas and Beulah* Dove also leans at the sink of African American literary tradition in making family the poetic material and poetic source. Throughout the volume her poetic composition pressure cooker ticks out the “pressure of absence”—in her grandparents’ personal lives and of such history as that of her grandparents—“these small people, these nobodies in the course of history,” in History. In an essay on the representation of the family in African American literature, the scholar Carolyn C. Denard identifies the “celebrat[ion of] the family’s mythical and metaphorical meanings for African American survival”<sup>36</sup> as an increasingly prevailing theme of black American writers in the seventies and eighties. She cites Dove’s 1986 *Thomas and Beulah* as one example among

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<sup>36</sup> “Family” Andrews, Foster, and Harris 269.

many, (primarily works of fiction).<sup>37</sup> In the Thomas poem, “One Volume Missing (33),” the encyclopedia bought “at the basement rummage sale/of the A.M.E. Zion Church” “for five bucks” is “*Werner’s Encyclopedia/..Complete in Twenty-five Volumes*,” and it lacks the twenty-fifth volume: “no zebras, no Virginia,/no wars.” As noted earlier, Charles Berger suggests that *Thomas and Beulah* represents that missing volume of the encyclopedia,<sup>38</sup> a reading in concert with Denard’s assertions regarding the book. Denard characterizes this literary period—late twentieth century—as marking a shift in African American literature back to a focus on the family, (albeit of course with different and eventually various cultural, historical, and literary permutations), which had been largely absent in the tradition for more than half of the twentieth century. More specifically she notes the move on the part of African American writers to the representation of “the valued role of the family elder and the larger role of the family in maintaining cultural history.”<sup>39</sup> Not only does Dove’s choice of her maternal grandparents’ lives as poetic material participate in this tradition, in *Thomas and Beulah*, one of Dove’s permutations within such a tradition is to link the telling of her family elders’ story to her own development and identity as poet, to name her family elders as poetic forebears. In doing so, she presents a missing volume in both American cultural history and in the “encyclopedia” of American *ars poetica* traditions.

When, in a 1990 review essay, Adrienne Rich addresses the issue of nourishment in Black American women writers’ work in the anthology *Wild Women in the Whirlwind*, she says that work “...shows... how Afra-American experience and culture have shaped

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<sup>37</sup> Denard mentions only two volumes of poetry in this part of her essay. The other is Michael Harper’s 1977 *Images of Kin*.

<sup>38</sup> “The Granddaughter’s Archive: Rita Dove’s *Thomas and Beulah*” 361.

<sup>39</sup> Andrews, Foster, and Harris 268. Denard cites two novels (and no books of poetry)—Margaret Walker’s 1966 *Jubilee* and Ernest J. Gaines’s 1977 *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, as signal African American texts marking this shift.

the written literature, and how the written literature returns to actual lives: storytelling, praise-songs, 'biomythography' (Audre Lorde's term) as collective and individual sustenance."<sup>40</sup> Certainly in *Thomas and Beulah* Dove has created a biomythography à la Lorde. Lorde characterizes her autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, as 'biomythography,' (adding to the lexicon of literary terms perhaps the most accurate word for the genre of autobiography).<sup>41</sup> The book of prose combines "elements of history, biography and myth."<sup>42</sup> Dove herself has made numerous statements regarding the ambiguous relationship between the facts and reality of her grandparents' lives and Thomas and Beulah's. She tells Schneider that Thomas's birth date year is not the same as her grandfather's (116). She tells Grace Cavalieri in a 1995 interview that while her maternal grandfather's name was indeed Thomas, her maternal grandmother's "was not Beulah, it was Georgianna." She says it was an "aesthetic decision" to use the name Beulah rather than Georgianna, because, "though it's a wonderful name, [it] was ...too male based for me. Also, it's a long name, and a very difficult name to fit on a line" (12).<sup>43</sup> (At the same time that Dove affirms that certain elements of Thomas's and Beulah's lives are "drastically changed," she also consistently speaks interchangeably of Thomas and Beulah and her grandparents in interviews.) Literally speaking, Dove as granddaughter figure appears nowhere in the written text of the book. She is, however, a presence, "in the leaps, the

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<sup>40</sup> "Words Out of the Whirlwind" 119.

<sup>41</sup> Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, Inc., 1982.

<sup>42</sup> Unattributed, back cover. Lorde begins the book with a three page untitled section in which she asks questions uncannily akin to the questions Dove asks herself in her *Selected Poems* introduction. Lorde's questions are: "To whom do I owe the power beyond my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?" (3); "To whom do I owe the symbols of my survival?" (3); "To whom do I owe the woman I have become?" (4).

<sup>43</sup> In illustration of one way in which poetic and 'real life' "truth and beauty" coalesce within the book, Dove says the process of coming to this decision brought her to the realization that "...I didn't have to be absolutely faithful according to biographical truth. I could go after an inner truth" (Cavalieri 12). An aesthetic decision in the language brings Dove a decision regarding the nature of the material in poetry that can be considered "true."

silences” of the writing. If indeed, to read *Thomas and Beulah* as “a string of moments that work together to define a universe much in the way a necklace defines the neck and shoulders,” as Dove instructs, then Dove is the silk thread not visible, but holding together the design of the necklace that is the poetry of *Thomas and Beulah*.

In the first poem of the book, Thomas’s “The Event” (11-12), Dove signals her presence in all of the book’s poems. “The Event” is the book’s originary poem according to Dove in her statements regarding how this book came into being. In it, Dove imbricates her poet self into the lyrical beads of narrative she writes to tell her grandparents’ story. When William Walsh interviews Dove she tells him, “I ...indulge a private literary joke by putting a dove in every poetry book. ...It’s fun” (147). In “The Event” Dove inserts herself at the moment in Thomas’s life when his story begins for her—when his best friend jumps from the boat in response to a dare from Thomas and drowns: “...Dove//quick as a gasp. Thomas, dry/on deck, saw the green crown shake/as the island slipped/under, dissolved” and Lem, who was going to swim to it, is gone: “Where the wheel turned the water//gently shirred.” Dove the poet, quick as a gasp, initially believing that the material she was working with would be “a single poem,”<sup>44</sup> enters the lives of her grandparents, as they enter hers as poet. She goes on from this poem, following through “the bliss of unfolding,” through the “...search for.... truth and beauty through language,” to a book length poem sequence. Submerging herself in Thomas’s life in an attempt to understand him, diving into “the thickening stream” over which Thomas stands on deck, Dove begins her exploration of “Where ...the water//gently shirred” below Thomas, trying to imagine “the moments that matter most” and “the connections [that] are submerged” in Thomas’s life, and ultimately Beulah’s. Dove re-emerges at the end of “Mandolin,” in Thomas’s last poem, “Thomas at the Wheel,” the title of which resonates back to Thomas on the riverboat in “The Event,” at the point Dove begins her exploration of his life. In the last stanza of

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<sup>44</sup> Schneider 117.

“Thomas at the Wheel,” Thomas lies dying of a heart attack, stretched out on the front seat of the car he was driving to the drugstore to pick up a prescription—“he laughed as he thought *“Oh/the writing on the water”* (43). Perhaps his pleasure is an epiphanic death moment, a moment of *Linga-Sharira*, the Hindu concept of “being across time” that the poet Tess Gallagher brings into her essay, “The Poem as Time Machine” (111). Truly this is what Thomas gives Dove—what Dove creates for herself out of following “the bliss of unfolding” throughout “Mandolin”—“*the writing on the water*”—the poems that come when Dove submerges herself in the shirring water in “The Event.”

For Gallagher, “[t]he poem ...takes place at the point of all possibilities,” and in the poem, “...the boundaries we thought were there between past, present, and future dissolve, if only for the time that is the poem” (111). They dissolve for Dove writing “Thomas at the Wheel” when she reaches back into Thomas’s life, into her past, for the book of poetry she is writing. They dissolve for Thomas in his death moment wherein Lem’s death in his past, his present dying, and his familial and literary future meld “across time.” Yes, Thomas answers the epigraph to his section of *Thomas and Beulah*—Tolson’s “Black Boy, O Black Boy,/is the port worth the cruise?.” He laughs as he thinks of “*the writing on the water*” his granddaughter will publish a quarter of a century after his death as *Thomas and Beulah*. The last line and a half of the poem read: “He heard sirens/rise as the keys swung, ticking.” Slipping into death, he presciently hears the pressure cooker of “In the Old Neighborhood” ticking the “*whole again whole again now*” of his life through its representation in his granddaughter’s book.

“Aircraft” and “Aurora Borealis” detail some of the “moments that matter..., [that] come in flashes,” and “the connections are submerged,” if you will, in the “thickening stream” of Thomas’s life. Those connections are available to Dove, who has submerged herself in that stream. Thomas, who is “[t]oo frail for combat” in the poem “Aircraft” (30) chafes at his job during the forties repairing airplanes for the war effort, unhappy to find himself working on “an interrupted wing” rather than “the gnarled intelligence of an

engine” which “women with fingers no smaller than his” are assigned to. The poem opens with the image of Thomas “stand[ing]/before an interrupted wing,/playing with an idea, nothing serious.” That idea relates to his experience at the movies “[t]he night before in the dark/of the peanut gallery...” when “he listened to blouses shifting/and sniffed magnolias, white/tongues of remorse/sinking into the earth.” Thomas, like Dove, is himself “interested in ...the things ...concerning small people,” not the “*big* moments” that interrupt his experience listening to and sniffing the details of other moviegoers: “Then/the newsreel leapt forward/into war.” Work itself interrupts his “playing with an idea”: “there is only/gray sheen and chatter/from the robust women around him/and the bolt waiting for his riveter’s/five second blast.”

In “Aurora Borealis” (31), the next poem in the “Mandolin” section, “Thomas walks out of the movie house” and into the sensation of “drowning and/The darkness above him/Spits and churns.” The image refers to the Northern lights visible in the night sky above and it is resonant of the tragic loss of his friend by drowning in “The Event,” which ends with the image of “the water//gently shirred” above the lost Lem. Here too in “Aurora Borealis,” as in “Aircraft,” full meditation on his experience is interrupted: “What shines is a thought/Which has lost its way.” Ekaterini Georgoudaki makes a claim about Dove’s poetry in *Thomas and Beulah* with which I agree—that Dove “inherits both her grandmother’s transforming imagination and her grandfather’s storytelling ability” (428). Dove uses that inheritance in her poetry to pay homage to her grandparents. In each of these Thomas poems Dove makes the gesture of honoring the “earned respect” handed down to her by her grandparents’ lives by completing the meditation, the moment, the story, that the various interruptions in Thomas’s life prevent her grandfather from completing. The historical and social conditions of being a Black blue-collar migrant from the South disallow the space in Thomas’s life for following the “bliss of unfolding” of his ideas, his experiences, into full creative expression. Two generations later, in part due to how her grandfather negotiated his social and historical position, Dove, experiencing the

benefits of the historical and social conditions of being “a first-generation middle-class black child,”<sup>45</sup> completes and restores Thomas’s “lost” creativity.

Following a comment by Grace Cavalieri linking Dove’s project in *Thomas and Beulah* with two other contemporary black women writers’ works also exploring familial themes—Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Dove responds with “one definition of eternity”:

—the feeling that we are not alone on this planet, that there are those who’ve gone before and those who will come, and that there is in fact a community of spirits, let’s say. I don’t mean spirits in the sense of ghosts, I mean a community of hearts, you could say, that’s there. To me that’s immensely and profoundly comforting, and in the case of Toni Morrison I have felt for so long that we were having our own conversation somewhere. She’s from Ohio. ...We grew up about forty miles apart. (15)

It is a definition akin to the Hindu *Linga-Sharira* Gallagher describes as the time of the poem: and one that aptly applies to Dove’s project in *Thomas and Beulah*. Gallagher believes poetry participates in the *Linga-Sharira*—the “continuing or fourth dimension of ‘being across time,’” and in so doing, “restores to [readers] consciousness” of that “being across time,” “which continues through change and which is immeasurable.”<sup>46</sup> In the poems in this book, Dove’s grandparents reach across that “‘being across time’” of poetry as poetic forbears to Dove. They participate in “the grand conversation” Dove characterizes tellingly, and in Gallagherian terms, as an “extended family of writers past, present and future” which she feels a part of when she writes.<sup>47</sup>

Just as surely as Thomas gives Dove the poems that follow “The Event”—his loss on the riverboat providing her with the crucial moment in which to begin, to dive into the “water/gently shirred” so that she may produce “*the writing on the water*” of his life—Dove’s grandmother calls to her to write Beulah’s poems. During a poetry reading Dove

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<sup>45</sup> Dove in Walsh 145.

<sup>46</sup> “The Poem as Time Machine” 111.

<sup>47</sup> Bellin 32.

gave some time after having published a group of several Thomas poems as the chapbook, “Mandolin,” in *Ohio Review*, Dove says she “...turned to ‘Dusting,’ a poem written way back in Berlin<sup>48</sup> and already included in *Museum....*” In that fortuitous turn Dove discovers that her “modest cycle of ‘grandfather’ poems” requires amplification and must be “expanded dramatically,”<sup>49</sup> as her grandmother speaks to her from the poem “Dusting.” Dove describes the experience thus:

At this point, with some distance acquired between poem and its original inception, I realized that the room described in it was modeled on my grandmother’s solarium, and the woman trying so desperately to recall her first love’s name was none other than my grandmother. It was as if she had stepped out of the poem to claim her place in my grandfather’s cycle: ‘you can’t tell just one side of a story,’ she seemed to be saying. In that moment, *Thomas and Beulah* was born: a book-length collection of poems chronicling the lives of my maternal grandparents, an epiphanal series of vignettes depicting an ordinary marriage lived out against the grand panorama of History—the Great Migration of blacks from the rural South to the urban North, world wars and depressions, the civil rights movement and the rise of Afro-American activism in the sixties. During this blessed time, the poems in *Thomas and Beulah* assembled themselves.<sup>50</sup>

In Dove’s description of her grandmother coming into her life—out of a poem and at a poetry reading no less—to insist upon her side of the story, she attributes to her grandmother the power of poetic source and inspiration. In describing her as another “spirit” with whom she converses, Dove implicitly connects her grandmother with Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Laureate in Literature and American literary figure of international stature. As participant in the “grand conversation” of Dove’s “extended family of writers past, present, and future,” Beulah—not an acknowledged literary figure but one of the “small people”—holds equal value to Morrison the Nobel Laureate.

Dove chooses as epigraph for Beulah’s section of the book these lines from the Anne Spencer poem, “Lines to a Nasturium (A lover muses)”:

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<sup>48</sup> Dove was there from 1979 to 1981.

<sup>49</sup> “autobiography” *the poet’s world* 95.

<sup>50</sup> “autobiography” 97.



Ah, how the senses flood at my repeating,  
As once in her fire-lit heart I felt the furies  
Beating, beating. (45)

Throughout her poems, Beulah's "senses flood" with imaginative enactments that transform what "her situation in life does not allow her," in Dove's words,<sup>51</sup> into magic, into song, into "art/useless and beautiful," as Dove says in Beulah's "Magic" (48). In its being "useless and beautiful," it is "like/sailing in air" for Beulah, much as song is for her—"the canary in bloom" of her section's title.<sup>52</sup> Pragmatically speaking it is useless, that is. The poems in "Canary in Bloom" affirm that Beulah's transformative art provides "a different way of addressing" the "given" of inequality of her grandparents' generational experience as black Americans which Dove discusses with Schneider. Dove does not include the parenthetical part of the poem's title in her attribution of the lines.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, that part of Spencer's title evokes, in its use of the word "muses," a reading of the lines Dove chooses from the poem, beyond their obvious fit as a description of Beulah. They signal Beulah's relationship to Dove, who in Beulah's section enacts her own sense flooding as she explores the "fire-lit heart" of her grandmother muse.

Dove's grandmother function as the book's source, and muse, is multi-fold. She provides the story that becomes occasion for Thomas's poem "The Event." That poem becomes Dove's initiation experience into a poetic process that (once Dove's grandmother speaks to her again from one of Dove's poems (and claims it as her poem)), ultimately amplifies into the book. Beulah urges Dove to the assembling of *Thomas and Beulah* she recalls in her Poet Laureate "autobiography" essay as a "blessed time." "Dusting," the epigraph poem for *Museum* out of which Dove's grandmother emerges as source and

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<sup>51</sup> Schneider 120.

<sup>52</sup> This image in the poem—of "sailing in air"—connects Beulah to Dove, who comes through her apprenticeship in the book, as she says, "free to fly in whatever direction I chose."

<sup>53</sup> The poem was published with the longer title in Arna Bontemps's 1963 collection *American Negro Poetry*.

inspiration for further poetry, becomes one of Beulah's poems in *Thomas and Beulah*. A member of the "community of hearts" (which Dove tells Cavalieri she feels a part of), Dove's grandmother—one of "those who've gone before"—tells Dove her poetic project is incomplete without Beulah's story also. The poem "Dusting" calls out *Beulah* to Dove as clearly as memory calls out *Maurice* to Beulah within the poem. Beulah following the "bliss of unfolding" to "Maurice" precipitates Dove following the "bliss of unfolding" of her grandmother's call further into the poem sequence that becomes *Thomas and Beulah*.

When Beulah sings in her section of the book, "Canary in Bloom," she is her granddaughter Rita Dove's familial *ars poetica* progenitor indeed, singing in images that claim her imagination's space in her world. Charles Berger characterizes the relationship between the poetic character Beulah and Dove as "the close identification between granddaughter and grandmother, in their shared penchant for the cultivation of imaginary space." He goes on to say, "All the more powerful then, are the necessary criticisms of Beulah's susceptibility, at times, to shabby substitutions."<sup>54</sup> I wholly disagree with Berger's assessment of Beulah's acts of imagination. He himself does not go on to enumerate any of the "shabby substitutions" he asserts her imaginative moments sometimes constitute. The word "shabby" actually appears in one of Beulah's poems—her death poem and the last poem in the book, "The Oriental Ballerina" (75-6). It occurs in the last line: "the walls exploding with shabby tutus." It marks the quality of Beulah's material life that she so imaginatively lives in quite unshabby ways in her poems in the book. It marks that "more intransigent lived reality" Beulah does not evade (as Thomas does not) and simultaneously extends through her acts of imagination to claim her space within.

The poem is set in Beulah's bedroom. (Dove tells Cavalieri, in a comment about this poem, that "...my grandmother ...basically took to her bed in the last year of her life" (12)). Early on in the poem, a music box "ballerina//pirouettes to the wheeze of the

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<sup>54</sup> 363.

old/rugged cross, she lifts/her shoulders past the edge/of the jewelbox lid.” It seems the music part of the music box is broken. The ballerina is not moving to the music of the jewelry box, but rather “twirls on the tips of a carnation/while the radio scratches out a morning hymn.” Beulah’s is one of “the bedrooms of the poor,” as further description of the ballerina reveals: :

...Two pink slippers  
touch the ragged petals, no one  
should have feet that small! In China

they do everything upside down:  
this ballerina has not risen but drilled  
a tunnel straight to America

where the bedrooms of the poor  
are papered I n vulgar flowers  
on a background the color of grease, of

teabags, of cracked imitation walnut veneer. (75)

When Nikki Giovanni writes about her experiences growing up poor and black in her poem, “Nikki Rosa,” she ends with these lines:

and I really hope no white person ever has cause  
to write about me  
because they never understand  
Black love is Black wealth and they’ll  
probably talk about my hard childhood  
and never understand that  
all the while I was quite happy.<sup>55</sup>

Dove knows, as does Giovanni, the truth Gwendolyn Brooks speaks when she says, “It is not true that the poor are never ‘happy.’”<sup>56</sup> For Dove, the “Black wealth” of familial “Black love” is also the riches of poetic practice she discovers in returning to her grandparents’ lives. There are no shabby substitutions among those riches, although shabby substitutions—for example, in the broken music box, in the wallpaper “the color of grease,

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<sup>55</sup> *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment* 58-9.

<sup>56</sup> *Report from Part One* 59.

of/teabags, of cracked imitation walnut veneer” of this poem, and most certainly in the Werner “Negro” entry of “Roast Possum”—exist in the lives of her grandparents.

“Recovery” (70) details Beulah’s experience of Thomas’s recuperation from the stroke he experiences in one of his poems (“The Stroke” 39). From where Beulah stands in the parlor, what she can see of Thomas, out on the porch, his feet in “corduroy scuffs,” is “one bare heel bobbing.” She recalls that “[y]ears ago he had promised to take her to Chicago.” Now, “[s]he stands by the davenport,/obedient among her trinkets,/secrets like birdsong in the air.” Surrounded by shabby substitutions—“her trinkets,” her never having gotten to Chicago—Beulah’s own recovery (from the impingement of shabbiness) involves the apprehension of “secrets like birdsong in the air.” She is the “Canary in Bloom” that titles her side of the story.

When asked by Cavalieri about the poem, “Canary,” which appears in Dove’s next book, *Grace Notes*, and which pays homage to Billie Holiday, Dove says:

Canaries are the birds that, of course, have a beautiful song; it’s also a term that musicians use for the female vocalist. And the canary is the type of bird that miners take down to the mines to test for poison gas leaks, and if the bird dies they know that the mine is not safe for men. (15)

Given Dove’s stance on the importance and primacy of language in poetry, one can assume that these comments on the various nuanced meanings inherent for her in the word “canary” are applicable to her use of it as the title of Beulah’s section in the book. The title comes from the poem “Dusting” (52-3), wherein Beulah dusts the solarium and simultaneously searches through her memory for the name “Maurice”: “...What/was his name, that/silly boy at the fair with/the rifle booth?” It occurs in lines that reveal Beulah’s transformative agency: “...Each dust/stroke a deep breath and/the canary in bloom.” Beulah at her household chore enacts the breath of song, the breath of poetry. “Each “dust/stroke” is a “deep breath,” a measure of poetry and of song, the song of “the canary in bloom.” So Beulah enters the realm of song and poetry. So she provides instruction for Dove on the uses of the small, quotidian activities of “small people” in song, in poetry. Beulah’s song throughout her section lets readers know that out of impoverished material surroundings

the riches of “secrets like birdsong in the air” can emerge. In Beulah’s world, material shabbiness is not the “poison gas” of poverty that can suffocate human spirit, strength, and creativity. To the question Gwendolyn Brooks poses in her poem, “kitchenette building”:

But could a dream send up through onion fume  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms

Even if we were willing to let it in,  
Had time to warm it, keep it very clean,  
Anticipate a message, let it begin?<sup>57</sup>

Dove says yes through her representations of Beulah in *Thomas and Beulah*. It is clear that the people living in Brooks’s kitchenette building, where tenants share a common bathroom, are poorer than Thomas and Beulah, who live in a single dwelling house (that of Beulah’s poem, “The House on Bishop Street”) from the mid-thirties on and do not smell “yesterday’s garbage ripening in the hall.” Nonetheless, the question whispers in further inquiry in Dove’s book also. In Beulah’s “Sunday Greens” (69), Beulah prepares the Sunday dinner of ham hocks—“Ham.../...nothing/but bones, each/with its bracelet/of flesh”—and collard greens. “The house stinks/like a zoo in summer” and Beulah “..wants to hear/wine pouring.” She does not; instead, “she pauses, remembers/her mother in a slip/lost in blues,/and those collards,/wild-eared,/singing,” in the last epiphanic lines of the poem. Through the stink of the house, “the canary in bloom” pauses—makes a breath stop in the poem—and then sings “an aria.” The yes of a Brooksian aria emerges through Dove’s inquiry into Brooks’s question as she frames it within her grandparents’ lives. It is the voice of Beulah that sings the aria and both the quotidian and shabby substitutions have their part in it. “Beulah/patient among knickknacks” is a “canary in bloom” in “Dusting.” In “Sunday Greens,” midst the stink of the house, Beulah hears “those collards/ wild-

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<sup>57</sup> *Selected Poems* 3.

eared,/singing.” In “Recovery,” “secrets like birdsong” infuse the air, arising out of Beulah’s reckoning of the impoverishments and the riches of her life.

Over and over again in her poems, Beulah sings the riches of her imagination amongst shabby substitutions, in Brooksonian “white and violet.” In “Pomade,” “[s]he sweeps the kitchen floor of the river bed her husband saw fit/to bring home with his catfish, recalling/a flower” (65) in very much the way she dusts and recalls the name “Maurice” in “Dusting” (53). The flower is “*Beebalm*. The fragrance always put her/in mind of Turkish minarets against/a sky wrenched blue” (66). In Dove’s description of her in an interview, “Beulah [is] the one who longed to travel and [has] dreams of going somewhere,” the one who, “for lack of any other means, travels in her mind.”<sup>58</sup> In her mind, Beulah leaves mud and catfish behind as she travels to Turkey. “[U]p through” mud and catfish, Beulah’s Brooksonian “dream” sends its particular “white and violet”: “Turkish minarets against/a sky wrenched blue.” In “The House on Bishop Street” (60), Beulah thinks of the “Jewish family next door,” how “Yumanski refused to speak so/she never bought his vegetables/ at the Canal Street Market...”; how his daughter Gertrude, “youngest and blondest,/slipped by mornings for bacon and grits.” Within this “more intransigent lived reality” of racism—this shabby substitution for humanity, there are “secrets like birdsong in the air.” There is the daughter Gertrude, secretly crossing the boundary her father erects. There is Beulah, knowing that “...[i]f she leaned out she could glimpse/the faintest of mauve—no more than an idea—/growing just behind the last houses.” In “Obedience” (62), Beulah muses on a smokestack “in the vacant lot across the street” in the industrializing Akron of the thirties and forties—“She can think up a twilight, sulfur/flicking orange then black/as the tip of a flamingo’s wing, the white/picket fence marching up the hill.” The “secrets like birdsong in the air” of Beulah’s poems provide the template for Dove’s practice of recounting the riches available to the imagination in those

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<sup>58</sup> Cavalieri 13.

places that are not “beautiful,” that are poor, shabby in some way. They also provide the template for Dove’s practice of asserting that the “small nobodies” in history practice imaginative acts, that go unrecorded, except by the grace of a poet like Dove, who records in *Thomas and Beulah* the imaginative acts of her maternal grandparents, two “small nobodies.”

Dove tells Schneider of working with Akron as “background” to Thomas’s and Beulah’s story, and while doing so, again suggests the wide range of literary influences at play in her poetry:

...Akron is not a tourist attraction. Let’s face it: few of us were born in beautiful places. Yet I remember Akron, Ohio as a place of beauty. Rilke says in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, that if you cannot recount the riches of a place do not blame the place—blame yourself, because you are not rich enough to recall its riches. (118)

Both Beulah and Dove are rich enough—Beulah in her imaginative enactments, Dove in her poetry about Beulah’s inner life as it exists contiguous to the historical and Historical realities of the Akron Beulah lives in. In Beulah’s imaginative enactments in “Obedience,” she practices the bliss of unfolding Dove claims as the pleasure and challenge of writing poetry. She builds images off the smokestack, the “twilight sulfur” one—and this one: “if she could order it down and watch/it float in lapse-time over buckled tar and macadam/it would stop an inch or two perhaps/before her patent leather shoes” (62). Dove tells Stephanie Izarek Smith that her “feeling... that history is not life” leads to an “obsession” in her poetry: “how does the individual apprehend a historical moment and do they even know it’s happening?” (32). The mid-twentieth century industrial city of Akron is rendered as it intersects with Beulah’s life. That intersection in the poem occurs primarily within Beulah’s imaginative space. Speaking of her grandmother with Steven Schneider, Dove says Beulah “is curious; she is intelligent; and her situation in life does not allow her to pursue her curiosity.” She goes on to say, “[i]f there is anything I want to honor in her, it is that spirit” (120). Dove’s representations of Beulah’s imaginative enactments honor that spirit. As do Dove’s own poetic practices in poems in other of her books.

“Silos,” one of the poems Dove wrote after completing this book, (calling those subsequent poems “little notes dropped down from heaven” which she was only able to write after undergoing the “apprenticeship” of *Thomas and Beulah*<sup>59</sup>) appears in her next book, *Grace Notes* (7). The word “shabby” appears in this poem also. In it, Beulah’s granddaughter Dove builds images off a feature of the landscape kindred to the one off of which her grandmother in “Obedience” builds images—the Akron silos of her childhood.<sup>60</sup> The poem invokes the various imaginative associations and transformations of “small people” seeing the silos, which are described in the poem’s opening lines as being “[l]ike martial swans in spring paraded against the city sky’s/shabby blue.” For a stranger, “...they put him in mind of Pan’s pipes/and all the lost songs of Greece.” For “the townspeople,” living with their presence daily and thus experiencing them in more quotidian apprehension than the stranger, the silos are a spillway of sensate associations and images: “like cigarettes, the smell chewy and bitter/like a field short of milkweed, or beer brewing, or/a fingernail scorched over a flame.” For children, “[t]hey’re a fresh pack of chalk,/dreading math work,” in a wonderfully whimsical representation of the transference humans make in creating metaphors. Using the image-making template Beulah provides her, and recording the imaginative enactments of “small nobodies” in a “shabby” place, here Dove pays homage to Beulah as her poetic progenitor.

True to her time, Dove is keenly conscious of the various social and cultural facts that can be read in the image of the silos. When the omniscient persona of the poem speaks the last two lines: “They were masculine toys. They were tall wishes. They/were the ribs of the modern world” (7), social and cultural contexts inform those last lines in an omniscient awareness—in their resonance back to the opening line’s image of “martial swans”—of

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<sup>59</sup> Hammer and Daub 33.

<sup>60</sup> I assume, based on my reading of the whole of *Grace Notes*, and various Dove interviews, that “Silos” has some of its origins in Dove’s fifties and sixties childhood in Akron.



masculine technology, the Cold War. On the other hand, in Dove's rendering of her, when Beulah follows the bliss of unfolding to the inner experiences of her quotidian world, the various "secrets-like-birdsong-in-the-air" images represent a more sentient response. In writing Beulah's poems, Dove creates in her grandmother the teacher who illustrates how an "individual apprehend[s] a historical moment"—sentiently, without concomitant analysis of the experience, yet nonetheless expressing a response that "transform[s] the world outside ...into a handful of inwardness." In Beulah's case, that response is one of transformation and affirmation in the face of her "more intransigent lived reality." In her Laureate essay, "a handful of inwardness," Dove spends some time discussing Rilke's poem, "Die Rosenschale" (she uses Edward Snow's translation, "The Bowl of Roses"), from which I have taken the two phrases of "transforming the world outside" and "into a handful of inwardness" in describing Beulah's response to the various challenges and proscriptions of her life.<sup>61</sup> "The world is inside us while we are in the world," Dove says about Rilke's poem, adding, "(And vice versa: We are in the world because the world is inside us)" (53). She could be commenting on any number of Beulah's poems in *Thomas and Beulah*. The poems suggest that Dove learned this wisdom sentiently from her grandmother first, before reading Rilke; and that such Rilkean assertion in her own poetic practices is an inheritance from her grandmother as much as from Rilke.

At the end of "The Oriental Ballerina,"  
...The ballerina dances  
at the end of a tunnel of light,  
she spins on her impossible toes—

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<sup>61</sup> The section of the poem she quotes in this part of her essay is:

...simply self-containing,  
if self-containing means: to transform the world outside  
and the wind and the rain and the patience of spring  
and guilt and restlessness and muffled fate  
and even the changing and flying and fleeing of the clouds  
and the vague influence of the distant stars  
into a handful of inwardness.

It now lies carefree in these open roses. (53)

the rest is shadow.  
The head on the pillow sees nothing/  
else, though it feels the sun warming

its cheeks. *There is no China;*  
no cross, just the papery kiss  
of a kleenex above the stink of camphor,

the walls exploding with shabby tutus....

All fades away in Beulah's death moment. The world inside her—her interior imaginative entanglements with the world outside—is gone as she is gone and the epiphanic death moment is represented in “the walls exploding with shabby tutus.” The “walls” that contained her intelligence and curiosity within a world that did not “allow her to pursue her curiosity” now explode in an epiphanic disintegration of the “shabby-tutus” of her world. Still, the ballerina of the shabby tutu “...dances/at the end of a tunnel of light.” It is toward her, one of her “trinkets”—the “ribs “ of her world—that Beulah moves in her death moment, in Dove's gesture of honoring her grandmother's spirit of grace, and the quotidian realities that inform by that spirit and are transformed it.

“*Practice makes perfect*, the old folks said,” in Beulah's poem “Magic” (48).

Dove's childhood dinner table practice of “learning how to shape life—or, more precisely, memory,” serves her well in shaping the various individual lyric moments Thomas and Beulah experience in each poem in *Thomas and Beulah*. Just as the poem “Parsley” in *Museum* speaks to the perversions of language, so too does “Magic.” Following the instructions of the “old folks,” when Beulah is “[s]ent to the yard to sharpen” knives, she takes their adage too far and ends up with a perversion of perfecting formal practice:

she bent so long over  
the wheel the knives  
grew thin. When she stood up,  
her brow shorn clean  
as a wheatfield and  
stippled with blood,  
she felt nothing, even  
when Mama screamed.

It is of this poem that Patricia Wallace makes the comment, “Rita Dove knows that the poet’s ‘magic’—to transform images and alter meaning—can evade a more intransigent lived reality” (15). Still, Beulah learns that lesson, as next in the poem, she successfully practices what for a child would be an act of magic, although later in science class she might learn that it is considered a fact of material biology and chemistry: “She fed sauerkraut to the apple tree;/the apples bloomed tarter/every year.” After this, Beulah feels “things happened/to her”—they happen to her, Dove’s literary progenitor, “[l]ike all art/useless and beautiful, like/sailing in air,” as Dove links Beulah’s experience in “Magic” to her own liberating experience in writing *Thomas and Beulah*—“free to fly in whatever direction” she chooses in her poetry after writing it. “Magic” ends:

One night she awoke  
and on the lawn blazed  
a scaffolding strung in lights.  
Next morning, the Sunday paper  
showed the Eiffel Tower  
soaring through clouds.  
It was a sign

she would make it to Paris one day.

Indeed, Beulah has made it to Paris— within the Rukeyserian “experience taken into the body, breathed-in,” of her granddaughter Rita Dove, experienced of the “wide world,” including Paris.<sup>62</sup> In Muriel Rukeyser’s meditations on poetry in *The Life of Poetry*, she talks of the relationship between individual experience and poetry (an absorption for her as for Dove) in this way: “Experience taken into the body, breathed-in, so that reality is the completion of experience, and poetry is what is produced. And life is what is produced” (221). Enmeshed in the life of Thomas and Beulah is the life of the poet Dove exploring some of her poetic origins. That enmeshment produces the poetry in *Thomas and Beulah*.

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<sup>62</sup> I suggest, not altogether whimsically, that it is quite possible that Beulah has perhaps also made it to Paris in someone’s hands, within the covers of the book *Thomas and Beulah*, which it is not completely unlikely someone sometime somewhere in Paris reads.

Regarding her writing process, Dove says, “The act of creation for me is an intensely private process. It’s even beyond private. When it’s really working, in a sense the poem is writing me, so that the self disappears.”<sup>63</sup> In this book, “in a sense,” Dove’s grandparents are writing her into her poet existence as she disappears within and into the writing process—appearing as the not visible thread stringing together the bead poems of the necklace that is the book. Her grandmother gives her the story about her grandfather that begets the book. When Dove thinks she’s completing her project, her grandmother emerges from the poem “Dusting” to say that the project is incomplete. The Thomas poems bring her to that point of being able to read “Dusting” in such a way that Beulah becomes part of the project. The grandmother is source for the Thomas poems and the Thomas poems become the source for the Beulah poems. They open up the space for Dove to be able to recognize that more poems exist for this project and they are Beulah’s; Thomas as poetic material becomes the poetic source for the Beulah poems. Thus Thomas and Beulah have a Mobius strip relationship within Dove’s writing of the book. As Dove has a Mobius strip poetic relationship to Thomas and Beulah in her writing. Dove creates their poems, her self disappearing in the writing, as they create her poetry, emerging as poetic forbears.

In *Thomas and Beulah*, the poet is in the family and the family is in Dove. —Just as Mickey is in the milk and the milk’s in him in Maurice Sendak’s *Mickey in the Night Kitchen*, which figures in the title of one of Dove’s poems in *Grace Notes*. The epigraph for “After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* For the Third Time Before Bed” (41) is from Sendak’s book: “*I’m in the milk and the milk’s in me! ...I’m Mickey!*” For Dove these lines are another version of the Beulahian, Rilkean “The world is inside us while we are in the world.” In the poem, Dove wonders, referring back to her daughter’s question about her periods: “How to tell her that it’s what makes us—black mother, cream child./That we’re in the pink/and the pink’s in us”—how to explain our familial relationship

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<sup>63</sup> Robinson “The Poet’s Obligation” 27.

(and its relationship to the “wide world” of literature invoked for her three year old daughter by Sendak’s book). This is the same question she asks herself in *Thomas and Beulah*, albeit without the biologically gender specific focus<sup>64</sup> of the question in “After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen*....” In *Thomas and Beulah* the answer for Dove as granddaughter poet is “I’m in Thomas and Beulah and Thomas and Beulah are in me.” This is the poetic familial heritage that Dove explores and honors. She tells Stephanie Izarek Smith that working on *Thomas and Beulah* was “a joy because I felt that I was in the middle of my grandparents’ world” (32). Of course it was. Dove was following the poetry’s “bliss of unfolding” back to some of its originary, familial sources.

It is as if in *Thomas and Beulah*, Dove herself heard her grandparents calling to her, as Lucille Clifton does to her four daughters in “Last Note to My Girls”:

I command you to be  
good runners  
to go with grace  
go well in the dark and  
make for high ground  
my dearest girls  
my more than me.<sup>65</sup>

The Dove who is the Cliftonian “more than me” of her grandparents—the granddaughter who is the more-than-her-grandparents could achieve given the historical, cultural, and social contexts of their lives—the poet granddaughter of Thomas and Beulah—has written the book of his life Thomas knew with prescient pleasure at his death moment that she would: “*Oh/the writing on the water*” (“Thomas at the Wheel” 43). She has taken Beulah to Paris, a place her grandmother knew “she would make it to ...one day” (“Magic” 49). Dove has learned well from familial sources and progenitors. At the end of “In the Old Neighborhood,” Dove returns from a second set of childhood memories after leaning

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<sup>64</sup> The culturally race specific question is one Dove takes up in *Thomas and Beulah* of course, which question necessarily relates to the biologically race specific.

<sup>65</sup> *an ordinary woman* 29.

herself at the sink to listen to her mother's "chatter/while the pressure cooker ticks/*whole again whole again now*." She comes back to the present getting-ready-for-the-wedding kitchen mid-way through her mother's question about the arrangement of the wedding flowers: "I am back/again, matron of honor,/firstborn daughter nodding yes as I wrap bones and eggshells/into old newspaper for burning,/folding the corners in/properly/as I had been taught to do" (xxvi-v). Properly, as she has been taught to do, by her parents at meal time, by her grandparents in their lives and in the poetry they called her to write, Rita Dove writes poetry, writes *Thomas and Beulah*, and in so doing, honors and practices the rich poetic familial heritage handed down to her through two generations of her maternal line.

## CHAPTER IV

### GRACE NOTES

The poet represses the outright narrative of his life. He absorbs it, along with life itself.  
The repressed becomes the poem.

Louise Bogan, in Ruth Limmer's *Journey Around my Room*, 1980.

**Grace notes.** Ornamental notes written or printed smaller than the 'main text' and accorded an unmeasured duration which is not counted as part of the written bar length.

*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.

Rhythm is a form cut into TIME, as design is determined SPACE.

Ezra Pound, "Treatise on Metre," 1934

To me, music is the most seductive language of all. I'm enthralled by the way those black dots perched on those lines translate into glorious, complicated sounds.

Rita Dove, 1994

"Early music reminds me of jazz in some odd way; I think it's the way that one is encouraged to invent the embellishments," Rita Dove tells Scott Robinson. Discussing her membership in an early music ensemble, she continues, "You have to listen to one another in a kind of improvisational way when you're playing in a consort."<sup>1</sup> This description of the improvisational relationship among members of both early music and jazz groups strikes a resonant chord alongside Dove's description of herself as a poet participating in the "grand conversation" of the "extended family of writers past, present, and future." Dove says that in titling her fourth book *Grace Notes*, "I had several things in mind; every

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<sup>1</sup> "The Poet's Obligation" 26.

possible meaning of grace, and of notes, and of grace notes, and also a little added riff.”<sup>2</sup> Dove continues in this book to amplify American poetic discourse, with her addition of these grace note poems to its main melody. Not counted as part of the written measure of a melody, grace notes in music are ornaments, embellishments. Grace notes would appeal to Dove, the poet of the uncounted—the “small people,” “the nobodies in the course of history”—who is also musician,<sup>3</sup> and widely learned in music, as Ezra Pound insists a poet must be.<sup>4</sup> They would also appeal to her as granddaughter of Thomas, he who “invented/embellishments.” The riff is a form Dove is well practiced in by the time she gets to *Grace Notes*, having written three volumes of poetry in which riffing off of a wide range of other poets’ work was one of the animating impulses in the poetry.

Dove talks about the *Thomas and Beulah* origins of the title *Grace Notes* in an interview with Mike Hammer and Christine Daub: “...I felt that ...grace had been afforded me. *Something opened up inside*,” allowing her to “write more personal poems” (33 my emphasis). Grace as a state of bliss—experiential and poetic—the “bliss of unfolding” to the poems in *Grace Notes* is what writing *Thomas and Beulah* afforded her. She says too, speaking to the other part to the title: “The poems themselves felt like little notes dropped down from heaven.”<sup>5</sup> The “little notes” of music exploring her grandparents’ lives become the grace note poems of this volume. Dove pays homage to her grandparents and the poetic instruction of their lives in the first poem of the book, “Summit Beach, 1921” (3). Just as Beulah’s poem “Dusting” was positioned as the epigraph to one of Dove’s books,

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<sup>2</sup> In Vendler (89) 486.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in a Chapter 1 footnote, Dove plays the cello, bass viol, viola da gamba, and has played gamba with various consorts. She sings with the University of Virginia opera workshop. She has written several pieces that have been performed publicly, among them the poem, “Umoja,” (commissioned for the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Cultural Olympics and performed again in 1998 in Minneapolis), and a song cycle she wrote in collaboration with the composer John Williams.

<sup>4</sup> This is his subject in part in “Treatise on Metre.”

<sup>5</sup> She adds that she doesn’t “mean this religiously” (Hammer and Daub 33).



*Museum*, so too “Summit Beach, 1921” (hereafter also referred to as “Summit Beach”) is positioned as epigraph to this book.

“O/intimate parasol/that teaches to walk/with grace along beauty’s seam” are the last lines of Beulah’s poem “Headdress” (68) in *Thomas and Beulah*. They describe the hat Beulah has made. The last lines of “Summit Beach, 1921” (3), the opening, epigraph poem for *Grace Notes*, are: “she climbed Papa’s shed and stepped off/the tin roof into blue,//with her parasol and invisible wings.”<sup>6</sup> In this poem, the image of the “intimate parasol” evoked by Beulah’s millinery creation in *Thomas and Beulah* and the image of the child Beulah’s parasol layer into one another within—and embody—the timeless-all time *Linga-Sharira* as Gallagher describes it in relationship to poetry—“the point of all possibilities” where “the boundaries we thought were there between past, present, and future dissolve, if only for the time that is the poem.”<sup>7</sup>

“Summit Beach, 1921” is Beulah’s poem as much as “Headdress”(67-8)<sup>8</sup> and her twenty other poems in *Thomas and Beulah* are. The unnamed girl on “[t]he Negro beach” in “Summit Beach” is Beulah<sup>9</sup> and it is not surprising to discover at the beginning of *Grace Notes* that the hat Beulah has made as a grown woman evokes, and is homage to, the parasol she carries, and believes will carry her, as she steps “off/the tin roof into blue” in exhilarating risk. In “Horse and Tree” (39), a poem from section III of *Grace Notes*, Dove says, “We call and the children sing back *one more time*.” Perhaps the child Beulah has

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<sup>6</sup> 3.

<sup>7</sup> “The Poem as Time Machine” 111-12.

<sup>8</sup> The book’s chronology indicates that Beulah “takes up millinery” in 1950, three decades after the day at Summit Beach detailed in the *Grace Notes* poem.

<sup>9</sup> Bonnie Costello, in “Scars and Wings: Rita Dove’s *Grace Notes*,” believes of this poem that “[within] 25 lines we learn the history of this girl’s stance and come to know her motives and desires even while we never know her name or her relation to the poet” (434). I agree that such is the scope of the poem as Costello characterizes it, yet I believe those of us who have read *Thomas and Beulah*, (as Costello has—she opens her piece with a description of it), do indeed know her name and her relation to the poet, even though the poem itself does not tell us directly.

sung back to Dove calling into the territory of poetry: “*one more time*,” hence “Summit Beach, 1921.” After all, Dove says her grandmother “...stepped out of the poem [“Dusting”] to claim her place in my grandfather’s [Thomas’s] cycle...,”<sup>10</sup> and was there at her inaugural poetry reading as Poet Laureate at the Library of Congress: “I would have been terrified if my grandmother hadn’t been beside me in spirit, chuckling, ‘Now ain’t this nothing.’”<sup>11</sup>

Summit Beach lies within the municipality of Akron and is fed by the Little Cuyahoga River, the site of “[t]he poor man’s history” in “The Gorge” (63), a poem from section V of *Grace Notes*. According to the chronology at the end of *Thomas and Beulah*, Beulah, having moved to Akron at the age of two, would have been seventeen in 1921, a plausible age for the girl in “Summit Beach, 1921,” whose father counsels her to take her time when it comes to the boys requesting a dance on that “Negro beach jump[ing] to the twitch/of an oil drum tattoo and a mandolin,” the latter Thomas’s instrument. *Thomas and Beulah*’s chronology also notes that Thomas arrived in Akron in 1921.

The “intimate parasol/that teaches to walk/with grace along beauty’s seam” that *Thomas and Beulah* was for Dove, as Beulah’s millinery creation was for both Beulah and Dove, engendered the intimacy of the poetry that Dove allows herself in *Grace Notes*, writing the “more personal poems” of this book. It is fitting homage then that the figures of Beulah and Thomas (his just a suggestion of presence through the music of the mandolin on the beach—a grace note sounding its unmeasured melody) open a book that Dove says was only possible because she had just “undergone an apprenticeship [in writing *Thomas and Beulah*] and now was ready to write those poems” that become *Grace Notes*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *the poet’s world* 97.

<sup>11</sup> *the poet’s world* 107.

<sup>12</sup> Hammer and Daub 32.

The appoggiatura is the grace note most widely used in music composition. The grace note form that precedes a regular note or measure of music, the appoggiatura grace note “leans ... on the following, so-called ‘main’ note...” of the melody.<sup>13</sup> Positioned as epigraph poem, “Summit Beach” leans on the poems comprising the rest of the book, informs them. In Dove’s formal gesture of writing “Summit Beach” as the appoggiatura to the main melody of poems to follow, Beulah and Thomas lean on the poetry in *Grace Notes*, inform it. The use of the phrase “so-called ‘main’ note” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* conveys an indirectly stated questioning of the conventional demarcation of grace notes as supplemental rather than equal to those of the ‘main text’ (also *Grove* phrasing) and of the conventional defining dynamics that characterize the grace note solely in relationship to the “main”—read dominant—note within a score. Dove’s book asserts a similar questioning—a challenging actually, of poetic conventions. Dove chooses a form conventionally considered supplemental rather than central in music composition, and uses it to embody the main text of a poetic composition. In doing so, she also highlights the importance for her of musicality in poetry.

In Ekaterini Georgoudaki’s essay on *Grace Notes*, she focuses on the various conventional social and cultural oppositions taken up in the book. She titles her essay “Crossing Boundaries.”<sup>14</sup> She does not consider the concept embodied in her title in terms of the metaphor Dove uses (by way of the book’s title) for the book’s formal structure, nor how that might signal a thematic concern for Dove. Nonetheless, Georgoudaki’s title is most applicable in this regard also. Within music conventions, the nature of grace notes is such that a piece cannot exist comprised solely of grace notes. In *Grace Notes*, Dove crosses that boundary and writes the whole musical score in grace notes. “What I want is this poem to be small,” says Dove in the poem in this volume, “Ars Poetica” (48), which

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<sup>13</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* Vol. 13 828.

<sup>14</sup> *Callaloo* 14.2 (1991) 419-33.

Jan Clausen found so troubling.<sup>15</sup> No small feat this one of Dove's here, claiming, by way of the title of this book, that the "main" form of it will be a "small" form; that the book will compose itself formally through a series of poems that, as grace notes figuratively, are conventionally existent only in relationship to a "main" text.

In "Summit Beach," the parasol and the "invisible wings" the girl believes in in her childhood flight off her father's shed roof, indeed do teach to "walk/with grace along beauty's seam." The young woman on "Summit Beach" has a "scar on her knee winking," the seam of mended skin the only visible sign of the mended leg, of her parasol and "invisible wings" experience, having jumped off her father's shed's roof and broken her leg. She remembers enduring the cast: "[h]er knee had itched in the cast/till she grew mean from bravery/...she was gold" (3). The girl endures the cast—and the social conditions of enforced racial segregation evoked by Summit Beach being a "Negro beach." She has a scar. It winks. *Here's looking at you* beauty's seam says. The young Beulah alchemizes the growing "mean from bravery"—in response to the cast's physical confinement and the "shabby substitutions" of Jim Crow—to the "gold" she is. She knows at an early age how to make those transformations Dove celebrates and honors in *Thomas and Beulah*. Reading "Summit Beach" alongside "Headdress," it is clear that the adult Beulah recognizes her transformative powers expressed themselves early on in her life. She who muses on her dead husband, Thomas, in "Company" (74), and speaks to his spirit these words: "*listen: we were good/though we never believed it,*" in "Headdress" sentiently knows that all her life she has been the "gold" she felt that day on Summit Beach. The hat she makes in that poem—the "intimate parasol/that teaches to walk/with grace along beauty's seam" is itself "[s]pangled/tulle, ...in green/and gold and sherry."

In the "bliss of unfolding," of following language as she explores her grandmother's experience on the beach, Dove confirms having learned to "walk/with grace

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<sup>15</sup> This poem and Clausen's commentary on it were discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

along beauty's seam" from her grandmother. At the end of the poem, Beulah recalls that jump off the roof--it was "into blue, // with her parasol and invisible wings." Following the "bliss of unfolding" in the writing of the poem, Dove comes to this last image, and in it, she too resides. She has said that after writing *Thomas and Beulah*, "I was free to fly in whatever direction I chose."<sup>16</sup> Surely it is Dove who steps out the roof also, she who jumps at the end of this poem "into blue, // with her parasol and invisible wings," into the writing of the poems that follow this one in the book.

The appoggiatura had other names in its history, no longer used: "forefall, backfall, half fall, beat, prepare or lead,"<sup>17</sup> the slew of which suggest the thematic, structural, and formal functions of the note, and additionally, Gallagher's *Linga-Sharira* in the historically as well as musically time-charged *forefall, backfall, half fall*. In forefall, backfall, half fall, Beulah steps "...off/the tin roof into blue, // with her parasol and invisible wings." She is "part of what is and may be," as well as of what has been for Dove. She provides the beat with grace note step. She prepares the way. She leads the way into *Grace Notes*.

*Grace Notes* represents a matured return to the material of Dove's first book, *The Yellow House on the Corner*. The two are similarly structured, each being divided into five sections. The poetry in both focuses on many of the same themes and subjects—poetry, family, female sexuality, black American experience and history. Both books share the inclusion of references to canonical Western creative traditions, as well as the establishment of equal value between such traditions and those of the "small people," the "nobodies in the course of history." In structure, *Grace Notes* departs from *Yellow House* in the additions of the epigraph poem and epigraph quotes for each section. I believe this formal, structural difference between the two books results from the accumulation of literary resonances, or

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<sup>16</sup> "On Voice" 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Grove* Vol. 13 828.

riffs, if you will, throughout Dove's opus and her more developed relationship to poetic traditions, by the time she comes to *Grace Notes*.

In *Yellow House* many of the poems written in the first person are historically distant and distinct from the poet, as in the slave narrative poems, or chronologically distant even if the speaker in the poem might be read as the poet, as in the "Adolescence" series, in which Dove surely pulls her imaginative powers back to her own adolescence. In *Grace Notes*, almost all of the poems are in a first person voice—some singular, some plural—that speaks more clearly of the poet's imbrication within the persona of the poem. One such poem is "Genetic Expedition" (42). Echoing her statement to Mike Hammer and Christine Daub, that writing *Thomas and Beulah* freed her to "write more personal poems"<sup>18</sup> (and once again confirming Beulah's influence on her *Grace Notes* poems), Dove tells Helen Vendler:

...I believe, in bringing certain things to light in *Thomas and Beulah*, I discovered other things beneath them. One of the things that happened in writing *Thomas and Beulah*, particularly with Beulah's section, was that the whole notion of children and motherhood began to come to light; I realized that I was in fact feeding some of my own experience as a young mother into Beulah and I was feeling incredibly uncomfortable about it until I realized that I was harboring an unspoken notion that poems about children and mothers are mushy and you just don't write those things. Once I became aware of that, I realized that what I had to do is to write these poems and that I was covering up a part of my own life that was very important. Technically, that meant that I had to work with poems which were much closer to my present state. ((89) 489-90)

When Dove discusses what is repressed that finally emerges in her motherhood poems, she speaks to more than the focus on the individual psyche of Bogan's statement, "The repressed becomes the poem." She is also addressing the self-censorship of the poet, motherhood having been a taboo for her in part due to her resistance of the excesses of confessionalism, and the link between female experience and confessional poetry. "Genetic Expedition" concerns itself with motherhood, as do other poems in the book, and it is a

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<sup>18</sup> 33.

more personal, more intimate representation and expression of motherhood, than, say, the motherhood of Beulah in “Daystar” (*T&B* 61), rendered distantly by the omniscient third person voice. —Or the motherhood of the *Yellow House* slave narrative poem “Someone’s Blood” (41). There the wrenching experience of a mother asking forgiveness of her daughter for having borne her as she is taken away from her daughter, sold down the river (literally, from “*Independence, Missouri/... to New Orleans*”), is described from the daughter’s point of view. While it is a vividly sketched scene, the poem is nonetheless a distant, abstracted rendering of mother experience compared to the motherhood poems in *Grace Notes*.

In “Genetic Expedition,” Dove adds a grace note of black female experience to Elizabeth Bishop’s epiphanic identity poem “In the Waiting Room.”<sup>19</sup> Dove’s poem opens with this stanza:

Each evening I see my breasts  
 slacker, black-tipped  
 like the heavy plugs on hot water bottles;  
 each day resembling more the spiked fruits  
 dangling from natives in the *National Geographic*  
 my father forbade us to read.

It is just such an image that sends the young female speaker (identified as the poet herself in the poem) of Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room” “sliding/beneath a big black wave,/another, and another.” Waiting while her aunt has dental work done, the niece is reading a *National Geographic*. She “studie[s] the photographs”: one of them, “black, naked women with necks/wound round and round with wire/like the necks of light bulbs.” To her, “Their breasts were horrifying.” “Suddenly, from inside,” the girl hears “...an *oh!* of pain—Aunt Consuelo’s voice...” Suddenly the boundaries of her identity are no longer intact and she falls into the *Linga-Sharira* consciousness where “all possibilities” converge, and the “all possibilities” of her identity converge: “Without thinking at all/I was my foolish aunt,/I—

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<sup>19</sup> Helen Vendler notes this connection also, in her chapter on Dove in “The Black Dove” (165). She elides the issue of race identity in her reading of the poem.

we—were falling, falling,/our eyes glued to the cover/of the *National Geographic*"; "...I felt: you are an *I*,/you are an *Elizabeth*,/you are one of *them*."

The specific lines of Bishop's poem that Dove's opening stanza in "Genetic Expedition" call and respond to are:

What similarities—  
boots, hands, the family voice  
I felt in my throat, or even  
the *National Geographic*  
and those awful hanging breasts—  
held us all together  
or made us all just one?<sup>20</sup>

Dove's "Genetic Expedition" is not just an exploration back to its poetic heritage as an American poem—back to part of its gene map in Bishop's poem. For the child Elizabeth Bishop the experience is primarily of female identity, intertwined with family interrelationship. Racial difference is explored—there is clearly the momentary stasis of racial difference experience in "you are one of *them*," but the emphasis in the poem is on the conflation of the child Elizabeth with her Aunt Consuelo and the *National Geographic* women within a consort of adult women. For the adult Rita Dove the experience is black female identity, and intertwined familial interrelationship inflected by racial difference within the family. The poem builds on the identity questions Bishop raises in her poem and on the central image of unclothed black breasts—"those awful hanging breasts" in Bishop's poem and in Dove's—those "dangling/from natives," which Dove sees her own "each day resembling more."

While it is not explicitly stated in that opening stanza that the father forbade the *National Geographic* because the images are exoticized, Othered images of black women, (rather than because they are of adult women with their breasts unclothed), it is clear that Dove, with her reference in the stanza to seeing her "breasts, slacker, black-tipped," like those of the native women she saw in the *National Geographic* forbidden her, experienced

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<sup>20</sup> *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* 159-61.



those images within both gender and race strands of her identity as a girl. Thus, “[e]ach evening,” begins the poem, “I see my breasts”; they are more and more like those of the *National Geographic* women who resonate within Dove’s own body experience every night when she undresses. “Each evening” as Dove prepares for sleep, pathway to the dream world, the unconscious, the native women appear through her body. The first stanza acknowledges the mysterious workings of identity within the human psyche that “In the Waiting Room” explores—“nothing stranger” says Elizabeth Bishop. Having set the call and response note to Bishop’s identity poem in the first of the five stanzas of the poem, Dove moves in the second stanza from her evening routine and its resonances to a description of her morning routine. New elements enter to amplify the field of identity Dove explores in the poem. Marriage to the white German national and fiction writer Fred Viebahn makes its first appearance in the poem, obliquely, through the second, “Each morning” stanza in which Dove “drip[s] coffee onto my blouse/and tear[s] into once slice of German bread,/thin layer of margarine, radishes,” a black American routinely and daily eating a German breakfast. The images of the German breakfast eaten by a black American and the coffee drips on the blouse contribute to the melding identity theme of the poem. These mundane images carry weight and emphasis within the identity field of the poem and resonate forward into the next, third stanza. Dove ends the stanza returning to her body, this time focusing on another body part also associated with being a mother: “the years/spreading across my dark behind, even more/sumptuous after childbirth, the part of me/I swore to relish,” enjambling the line so that the “sense”—of the line, and of the whole second stanza—“straddles” the second and third stanzas, to borrow from John Hollander’s description of enjambment.<sup>21</sup> The poetic device of enjambment functions as does the grace note in music. It creates the connection between two other elements of the piece.

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<sup>21</sup> *Rhyme’s Reason* 11.

What Dove swore to “relish//always” is her “dark behind, even more/sumptuous after childbirth” in the second stanza, and her daughter in the third. The first line of the third stanza, providing closure of the last lines of the second, and opening the poem to a further dimension of Dove’s identity, is: “always. My child has,” enjambed once again, as are the last four lines of the stanza before. A stream of straddling “senses,” of associative resonances regarding identity, accrete out of the second stanza into the third. Dove’s “child has/her father’s hips, his hair,/like the miller’s daughter combed gold.” Enter into the poem the child directly drawn of a white father and black mother. In “After Reading *Mickey in the Night Kitchen* for the Third Time Before Bed” (41), Dove muses on the meaning of this for her daughter’s sense of who she is and for their mother-daughter relationship. The epigraph for the poem is from Sendak’s book named in the title: “*I’m in the milk and the milk’s in me! ...I’m Mickey!*” “Every month,” her daughter “wants/to know where it hurts/and what the wrinkled string means/between my legs.” Dove describes her response to her daughter’s queries:

...This is good blood  
 I say, but that’s wrong, too.  
 How to tell her that it’s what makes us—  
 black mother, cream child.  
 That we’re in the pink  
 and the pink’s in us.

At the end of the third stanza in “Genetic Expedition,” the question is raised: How to explain this phenomenon provoked by “black mother, cream child”—“Though her lips are mine, housewives/stare when we cross the parking lot/because of that ghostly profusion.” This stanza is endstopped in a formal separation from the fourth, which begins with a further description of Dove’s daughter. Not only is her daughter separated formally within the poem from the racial identity distinctions and differences housewives in parking lots stare at, her observation of the differences she observes between herself and her mother is also.

“*You can’t be cute, she says. You’re big,*” Her mother’s daughter, she has an eye for aesthetic distinctions. This places her in the aesthetic line Dove establishes within her

family in *Thomas and Beulah*. From a classic, one might say universal childhood perspective, at the moment of her utterance in the poem, Dove's daughter notes the difference of significance between mother and daughter, adult and child, as size. Size is the identity strand Dove's daughter experiences in her moment of voice in the poem. Perspective is changed. The question of the poem is no longer how to explain the housewives' stares. The field of identity experience within the poem amplifies out of the daughter's observation of identity difference. Dove speaks to this at the end of the poem, beginning in this fourth, penultimate stanza, through its enjambment, into the fifth, final one line stanza. She describes her own reaction to her daughter's words: "...She regards me/with serious eyes, power-lit,/atomic gaze/I'm sucked into, sheer through to//the gray brain of sky." The "atomic gaze" her daughter gives her evokes the genetic line Dove and her daughter share, and share along the *Linga Sharira* of the poem, extending back to Beulah, the figure Dove has explored as both familial and poetic ancestress. The field of American poetic traditions is amplified by the last line of the poem, as Dove sets in place a final line—"the gray brain of sky"—which riffs on Emily Dickinson's "The Brain—is wider than the Sky—."<sup>22</sup> The line's brevity and its small stanza size compared to the other stanzas (like Dove's daughter in comparison to Dove herself) appear a call and response to Dickinson's formal techniques—compressed lines, short poems—and its abstract image to the abstract concepts Dickinson's poetry mines. Gray is a "neutral" color. Dove's daughter reminds her that individual black identity, as all individual identity, is comprised of multitudinous strands of experience, race among them.<sup>23</sup> The Dickinsonian image Dove is pulled into by her daughter's words suggest that the "ghostly profusion" so stare-worthy in

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<sup>22</sup> *Complete Poems* 312-3.

<sup>23</sup> Recall from chapter 11 that Dove speaks to the question of identity and race in an interview with Mohamed Taleb-Khyar in this way: "I try very hard to create characters who are seen as individuals—not only as Blacks or as women, or whatever..." Certainly her poems on Schumann and Berlioz illustrate this. She goes on to say that "one could argue that insisting upon that individuality is ultimately a political act, and to my mind, this is one of the fundamental principles a writer has to uphold..." (361).

parking lots is the merging of all the identity elements of the poem into the “gray” of the brain. That “the gray brain of sky” is a Dickinsonian image suggests that the genetic expedition of the poem moves itself into the terrain of epistemological explorations Dickinson mines in her poem “The Brain—is wider than the Sky—.” As always, exploration of the *Linga-Sharira* of American poetic traditions proves a fruitful poetic enactment for Dove.

Dove discusses her experiences of being black in the United States with Christine Daub and Mike Hammer in response to one of her section epigraph selections. The epigraph consists of the following lines, from Claude McKay’s poem “My House”:

*I know the dark delight of being strange,  
the penalty of difference in the crowd,  
the loneliness of wisdom among fools. (45)*

When asked by the two, “How autobiographical is this—is this something you felt at the time or....something you feel now?,” Dove replies:

I think I always feel like that. People don’t realize how tedious it gets to be the only black person in a room....not that you want to run over to another black person and coo—just how tiresome it is always to stand out, always to feel that you’re the Other. Claude McKay’s poem was written during the Harlem Renaissance; it reassures me that I’m not merely being paranoid. There is a delight in Difference too. Sometimes being the Other gives you clarity. That ‘dark delight’ can apply to other situations besides race. Writers, particularly in this country, grow up feeling “strange.” There are secret delights in this Apartness. (34)

Not only does this quote illustrate the personal, lived connection Dove has to the poems of *Grace Note*, it also speaks to a connection Dove makes between racial experience and literature in many of the poems in the book, a connection that takes on varying dynamics in each poem in which it is made. This is not a surprising link for this poet of equal passion for life and literature, who has said, “[t]he only genuine wellspring of literature is life—life with all its complexities and contradictions.”

The world of literature and of life entwine in troubling ways in the poem “Arrow” (49-50)). It is not merely in mother experience poems that Dove works “much closer to [her] present state.” The poem centers on an experience Dove has as a professor. Dove’s

comments in essays and other interviews allow the identification of the “I” as Dove in this poem, as her above statements to Vendler allow in “Genetic Expedition.” The subject of the poem is the lecture of an “eminent scholar,”<sup>24</sup> and the reactions she and three of her female students have to it. Here the music of the book becomes discordant, the poem sounding the acciaccatura form of the grace note—a discordant grace note sounded with a principal note or chord and immediately released. The poem riffs on Michael Harper’s “Tongue-Tied in Black and White,”<sup>25</sup> which addresses itself to John Berryman. Harper says to Berryman in his poem: “Now I must take up our quarrel;/never dangerous with women/though touched by their nectared hair,/you wrote in that needful black idiom/offending me...,” asserting that his own poem “...is less then the whole truth/but it is the blacker story.” In “Arrow” “[t]he eminent scholar ‘took the bull by the horns,’/substituting urban black speech for the voice/of an illiterate cop in Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazusae*.” The students react: “Dana’s purple eyes deepened, Becky/twitched to her hairtips/and Janice in her red shoes/scribbled *he’s an arschlock; do you want/to leave? He’s a model product of his/education....*” Dove reacts: “...my chest flashed hot, a void/sucking at my guts until I was all/flamed surface. I would have to speak up.” Dove’s quarrel is not with a friend as Harper’s is with Berryman. Harper is able to offer sympathetically, even affectionately rendered sketches of Berryman the poet and Berryman the man: “What eyes/met the black student/next to me, her hands fanning/your breezy neck from this veranda,/but Henry’s/Mr. Bones”;<sup>26</sup> and “You admired my second living son/as you loved the honeyed dugs of his mother.” For

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<sup>24</sup> Alfred Corn says of this “professor-translator” figure in “Arrow”: “in ‘real life’ this can only be William Arrowsmith,” deducing this from the poem’s references to Aristophanes, and Montale (obliquely, in “Italian Nobel Laureate”) (38). Helen Vendler says the figure “may be William Arrowsmith” (“A Dissonant Triad (149)).

<sup>25</sup> *Images of Kin* 49.

<sup>26</sup> Harper riffing here no doubt on, among others in Henry’s repertoire, “Dream Song 7,” wherein Henry fills with hunger for the woman across the table from him at the restaurant who is “Filling her compact & delicious body/with chicken paprika” (*The Dream Songs* 6).

Dove there is no such connection with the “eminent scholar.” From the podium, he sounds forth the principal chord “in the language of the fathers” Dove appropriates for her “eminently civil” response at the lecture. At the writing desk, Dove, the “...hawk:/a traveling x-marks-the-spot” of “Ars Poetica,” sounds the acciacatura grace-note poem of “Arrow.”

Helen Vendler considers “Arrow” a “lesser poem”<sup>27</sup> and “relatively unsuccessful,” and reads it as “fail[ing] because it has no imaginative interest in the lecturer whom it accuses of racism.”<sup>28</sup> Certainly this is the point of the poem. The “eminent scholar” has “no imaginative interest,” indeed no sort of interest, in figures such as Dove and her three students. When “the scholar progressed//to his prize-winning translations of/the Italian Nobel laureate,” Dove thinks, “Quite lovely, these poems./We could learn from them although they were saying/*you women are nothing, nothing at all.*” She raises her hand and asks her question, “eminently civil my condemnation/phrased in the language of the fathers,” only to have the answer come “as it had to:/humanity—celebrate our differences—/the virility of ethnicity,” once again rendering invisible these women, with the celebration of the “virility” of “humanity,” of “ethnicity.” This poem is not about reaching across the divide, about having “the courage to be open to someone” that is the dominant impulse of Dove’s poetry.<sup>29</sup> It is about what occurs on one side of that divide, the female and black female experience in the face of erasure. Each of the students have “their different ways of coping.” Dana, “knowing it best to have/the migraine at once,” will “get the poison out quickly.” Becky will hold “it back for five hours.” Janice “will wear red for three days or/yellow brighter/than her hair so she can’t be/seen at all”. Dove has “scribbled back” to Janice’s *arschloch* note: “*we can learn from this,*” and offers from her side of the divide,

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<sup>27</sup> “A Dissonant Triad” 149.

<sup>28</sup> “Identity Markers” f.n. 21, 398.

<sup>29</sup> She discusses the importance of this impulse with Grace Cavalieri 14.

“Arrow.” Not all divides are bridgeable at the moment in which they are experienced. To represent this, to sound this note, is to insist upon this being heard, even if it sounds discordantly alongside the main note.

The poem refuses erasure and silencing in an act of poetry inflected by Audre Lorde’s assertion of the transformative power of translating silence into language and action. Lorde says, “In the cause of silence, each one of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the very visibility without which we also cannot truly live.”<sup>30</sup> “Arrow” counters the contempt of “the virility of ethnicity,” the annihilating poison of the lecture, and the invisibility Janice retreats into. It renders Janice visible through the scrim of her attempts to not be seen, gives her palpable presence as the ending image of the poem, vividly visible behind the pain. Addressing issues and experiences explored in the poem, in her essay for the second volume of *The Writer on Her Work*, Dove writes:

I’ll be lost in the luxurious foliage of Western civilization when a passage from *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* will bring me up short—“never a woman who’d really ‘come’ naturally with a man: except black women, and somehow, well, we’re white men; and they’re a bit like mud”—with the brutal reminder that the culture I was feeding on had no interest in nourishing me. (167)

In a poem that speaks to the negative powers of language once again, as did *Museum’s* “Parsley,” Dove here has moved on to strategies of releasing the knot experienced by “shared relatives in blacktown/on the outskirts of your tongue, tied still,” that Harper’s poem ends with, unreleased within the poem itself, yet released by the act of the poem.

“Arrow” and “Genetic Expedition” illustrate the range of poetic sources Dove riffs on in her poetry. —“Summit Beach, 1921” and “Arrow” the virtuosity with which Dove provides graces notes, “embellishments,” to some of those sources, sounding the

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<sup>30</sup> 21.

appoggiatura in homage to “small people” and “nobodies,” the acciaccatura in opposition to any note that silences another. The field of American poetics is more complexly constructed and interrelated than the study of one strand, one school, one historical movement, one *ars poetica* line, Dove illustrates in *Grace Notes*.

The riff is a form of the ostinato element in music. Ostinato signifies “the repetition of a musical pattern many times in succession while other musical elements are continually changing,” which repetition may sustain “[s]ome degree of variation.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout all of the poetry in this and all of Dove’s books, riffs on other poets’ material occur. Call-and-response repetition patterns in west African music are assumed to be the origins of the riff, which is most commonly associated with jazz and the blues. “Canary” (64) focuses on Billie Holiday, jazz songstress, and can be read as a call and response to “The Day Lady Died,”<sup>32</sup> Frank O’Hara’s exquisite, New York gritty elegant elegy for Billie Holiday.

In O’Hara’s poem, the ending lines stop the breath of the poem. Stopped is the measure of music of the poem. Stopped is the measure of the voice of “love [sharpened] in the service of myth” that is Dove’s Billie Holiday’s “burned voice” in “Canary” and her riff on O’Hara. In those end lines of O’Hara’s poem he has just read the *New York Post* headline of Holiday’s death while buying cigarettes and is “thinking of/leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT/while she whispered a song along the keyboard/to Maldron and everyone and I stopped breathing.”<sup>33</sup> Dove begins her poem with an image resonant of O’Hara’s last image: “Billie Holiday’s burned voice/has as many shadows as lights,/a mournful candelabra against a sleek piano,/the gardenia her signature under that ruined face,” the ruin that leads to her early death, her voice “a mournful candelabra against [the]

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<sup>31</sup> *Grove* Vol. 14 11.

<sup>32</sup> The poem, riffing another variation of the theme of voice in “Tongue-Tied in Black and White,” is for Michael Harper.

<sup>33</sup> Friebert and Young 326.



keyboard,” where perhaps it is Mal Waldron playing. She ends the poem with a one line stanza so enigmatic, it stops the breath of the poem: “If you can’t be free, be a mystery.”<sup>34</sup> It stops the breath of the poem and simultaneously opens up an inquiring riff of associations back through the poem, where a wellspring of evocative, Holiday-paced lines accrete images of Holiday “against a sleek piano,” bent over her works—”magic spoon, magic needle,” languorously arriving at her “bracelet of song.”<sup>35</sup> The audience stops breathing in both poems, Dove’s riffing O’Hara’s here in formal strategy, and is propelled out into the mystery at the end of Dove’s poem. That mystery is strikingly similar to the one engendered in the last lines of Dove’s next book, *Mother Love*. “No story’s ever finished; it just goes/on, unnoticed in the dark that’s all/around us: blazed stones, the ground closed” (77), says the poet-speaker of the search for poetry’s source. Listen to Billie Holiday; she will take your breath away; in “Canary” it is an unanswerable mystery how and why she does so. An identification between Dove and Holiday resonates out of “Canary.” “As if anyone could pin this down,” says Dove about her colleague’s attempt “to figure out how she does it”—how she writes the poetry she does.<sup>36</sup>

While one may not be able to figure out how Dove, or any poet, successfully enacts the life of the poem, one can experience the enactment by following the language in its “bliss of unfolding,” in the process accumulating clues to the poem’s animating impulses, if nothing else. “The Island Women of Paris” (65) provides a most evocative opportunity to do so. In their eponymous poem, the island women of Paris respond to the European

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<sup>34</sup> Dove offers a simple explanation of this line’s meaning: “she kept her head up even if she had to walk through shit. From the head up she seemed to be saying, ‘I’m smelling roses.’ At the same time, though, you could see in her performances a way she had of shutting herself off from the world, because otherwise it would have brought her down much earlier than it eventually did. That’s what the last line... refers to: if you can’t be free, don’t show it; don’t let them get to you” (Bellin 30). This description explains the origins of the line, but does not account for its poetic resonance.

<sup>35</sup> This metaphor brings to mind Dove’s use of the necklace metaphor in describing the form of *Thomas and Beulah*, suggesting a link between Holiday’s and Dove’s work with creative forms.

<sup>36</sup> Bellin 32.

imperialism and colonization, legacy of manifest destiny—evoked in the poem as “imperial courtesy” and “their manifest brows” respectively—that brought them to Paris. The island women “skim from curb to curb like regatta” in the poem’s opening line. The poem moves in a skimming curve from its title, “The Island Women of Paris,” to the first line just quoted, moving formally in parallel motion to that of its subject, the women themselves. The line “Who can ignore their ornamental bearing” poses a question of the book. Who can ignore the grace notes, “ornamental notes”<sup>37</sup> of the poetic tradition? In the poem “It’s better/.../[to] not look an island woman in the eye—/unless you like feeling unnecessary” (65). Dove says “The Island Women of Paris” is a “humorous poem and a poem of praise.”<sup>38</sup> *Grace Notes* itself praises grace notes and through this poem humorously suggests that the main melody of the poetic tradition will risk feeling unnecessary itself if it looks the “unnecessary” grace note poems of the volume in the eye.

“Who can ignore” these island women of Paris, “their ornamental bearing,/.../or deft braids carved into airy cages/transfixed on their manifest brows?” Into the “main text” of French imperialism and colonization, Dove writes this ornamental grace note poem. The island women are “in cool negotiation with traffic/each a country to herself” as they skim and glide the Parisian streets. In cool negotiation with the trafficking of manifest destiny, “their.../.../braids carved into airy cages/transfixed on their manifest brows,” they give “weight and emphasis” to themselves—they have “manifest brows”—in relationship to manifest destiny. This is the poetry of “direct experience” à la Simic, in which the island women of Paris provide Dove the opportunity to consider imperialism and colonialism through the “sanctity of the individual as the sole repository of the authentic.” The beautiful skimming, gliding, ornamental lines of the poem give “weight and emphasis” to the island women’s experiences moving about the streets of Paris. The rhythmic movement of the

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<sup>37</sup> *Grove* 596.

<sup>38</sup> *Cavalieri* 15.

lines is the “form cut into TIME” Ezra Pound defines as rhythm in his “Treatise on Metre,”<sup>39</sup> an essay in which he declares with passion the centrality of music to poetry and discusses the formal elements in poetry that make its music—its rhythmic “weight and emphasis” in the words of Dove’s poem. The fluid formal enactment of the island women’s experiences moving about the streets of Paris also provides a “form cut into” historical “TIME” and gives “weight and emphasis” to the women’s experiences of History. In their grace note poem, the island women have the “manifest brows” of those whose encounters with Historical “imperial courtesy” have not denied them their own sense of agency. They “move through Paris/as if they had just finished inventing/their destinations,” one of which comes to be their presence in Rita Dove’s poetry and American poetry.

In the foreword to *Mother Love*, the next book of poetry Dove publishes after *Grace Notes* and a sonnet sequence, she describes the poet writing the sonnet form as “struggling to sing in [her] chains” and suggests that the sonnet form, even when varied from “the strictly Petrarchan or Shakespearean forms,” can be “a talisman against disintegration.”<sup>40</sup> To transpose in music is to write or perform a musical piece in a different key. The island women’s “ornamental bearing,” their “braids carved into airy cages,” transpose the “fluke called ‘imperial courtesy,’” which “transposed [them] to this city.” Their “braids carved into airy cages/transfixed on their manifest brows,” and their movement through Paris in a “glide ...held aloft/by a wire running straight to heaven,” are a fitting “talisman against disintegration” inherent in the experience of the colonized, whose song and experience are “transposed” in the colonizer’s song of manifest destiny. Once again riffing on Harper’s “Tongue-Tied in Black and White,” as she does in “Arrow”( with a lighter grace note accompaniment than that of “Arrow”), Dove makes the move of releasing the knot experienced by “shared relatives in blacktown/on the outskirts of your

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<sup>39</sup> Allen and Tallman 62.

<sup>40</sup> xii and xi respectively.

tongue, tied still,” that Harper’s poem ends with. The island women are “shared relatives [of Dove’s] in blacktown/on the outskirts of” imperialism’s ‘main’ note-sounding “tongue.” The “ornamental bearing” grace note of “The Island Woman of Paris” unties, loosens the island women from the “main text” tongue of imperialism’s story.

In the last line of the opening sestet stanza of the poem, “fluke” conjures the flinging motion of the whale’s tail, continues the water movement and image in the poem—the “skim,” the “regatta,” the “glide.” The women from colonized islands in the poem skim the streets of the City of Lights like islands from afar might seem to skim the surface of the water. “*All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was,*” Dove quotes Toni Morrison in her grace note epigraph to section I. The island women of Paris are skimming the water of perfect memory, in Dove’s move through the *Linga-Sharira* enacted throughout the poem, trying to get back to where they were, their place and song in “what was a part of what is and may be....”

Within the field of the book, the melody of purely grace notes, that move takes the poem to, among other places and songs: the jazz club and “bracelet of song” of “Canary”’s Billie Holiday; the room where Beulah makes her “intimate parasol of a hat”—an emblem of shelter handed on to any number of figures in Dove’s poems here to “teach... to walk/with grace along beauty’s seam”; the university lecture hall where Dove and her students endure their erasure and silencing, “growing mean with bravery,” sounding the discordant acciaccatura grace note; the beach in Akron where young, winking-scarred, “gold” Beulah demurs courtship advances to the background beat of the “Negro Beach.” In *Grace Notes* the grace note poems get back to where they were, among the notes of the main melody all along. The grace note poems enter the wide, expansive *Linga-Sharira* of American poetic traditions, perhaps to diffuse themselves as riffs, or grace notes, or the main melody, within a poem yet to emerge from the “point of all possibilities,” wherein intersect “what was a part of what is and may be.”

## CHAPTER V

### *MOTHER LOVE*

The poet represses the outright narrative of his life. He absorbs it, along with life itself.  
The repressed becomes the poem.

Louise Bogan, in Ruth Limmer's *Journey Around  
My Room*, 1980

In his introduction to his translation of Hesiod's *Theogony*, the great cataloguing tale of the origins of the cosmos through the birth of the Greek gods, Norman O. Brown says "...all mythical poetry is a reinterpretation of traditional myths in order to create a set of symbols which give meaning to life as experienced by the poet and his age." He goes on to say that in the *Theogony* Hesiod writes "...a creative interpretation which reorganizes old myths, alters them, and supplements them with new inventions" (35). So too, Dove in *Mother Love* writes such a creative interpretation, of the Demeter/Persephone myth, which gives "meaning to life as experienced by the poet and [her] age." In her 1993 interview with Steven Bellin, she talks about myth in relationship to both *Grace Notes*, out four years then, and *Mother Love*, poems of which she was working on at the time of the interview. She says, discussing the poem "The Gorge," in *Grace Notes*, that "[m]yth begins in anecdote—telling a story in order to entertain—but it also constructs a narrative as a way of explaining our place and our progress in the world" (20), echoing Brown. She segues into her discussion of the Persephone/Demeter poems she says she's been writing "a lot of... lately" (22), by making an assertion acknowledging with delight the thievery origins of her not yet finished book<sup>1</sup>: "A myth or a legend becomes indispensable through the retelling. Generations repeat and elaborate upon the basic story; the really great tales are stolen by

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<sup>1</sup> Bellin notes that Dove "laughs" at the end of this statement (21).

other cultures and changed to fit their new surroundings” (21). This is Dove’s great delight, stealing not only tales, but forms, from other cultures, other traditions, and working with them as they fit, and to fit them, to “their new surroundings.” Dove tells Steven Bellin that she finds the Greek Classic Persephone/Demeter myth emerging through its resonance in her own life. What emerges in *Mother Love* is the story of a late twentieth century biracial American daughter separating from her black mother; and the European Renaissance sonnet form as “ideally suited” for Dove’s project in *Mother Love*, in which “...mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet—are struggling to sing in their chains.”<sup>2</sup>

Dove says the poems in *Mother Love* “actually began as a technical exercise.” She discovered what the poems were about through her daughter’s reading of some of the poems:

When I look back now, it’s so obvious—my daughter Aviva was about five years old at the time, just about to enter kindergarten, to go out into the world. I had some readjustment to do as a mother. If I hadn’t been oblivious to the actual reason, if I had tried to write about mothers and daughters consciously, I wouldn’t have made it to first base. As it was, I simply decided to explore this myth which had attracted me for whatever reason,<sup>3</sup> and I began by writing sonnets, not thinking at all of the personal implications [laughs]. It really didn’t dawn on me until—let’s see, Aviva was five then, so I began writing these six years ago, and since then it’s gone beyond sonnets to double sonnets and all kinds of strange things.<sup>4</sup> Then, when Aviva was in third grade, she had to give a report on Greece, so she had been reading this book on Greek myths for weeks, just loving it. One day she came into my room with the book under her arm and said, “Hey! You’ve been writing about me!” [laughs]. I’d been reading her some of the poems, and she hadn’t paid much attention; but when she read the classic version of the myth, it all clicked. She walked out of the room grinning, and I couldn’t write a single word more that day. ‘Wow,’ I thought, ‘how blind can you be?’ But it was a necessary blindness, I think. Some poets will use rhyme and meter in that way, and some use persona poems or journal entries, notebooks. In this particular case, it was the outer structure of the myth that I allowed to guide the writing. Exploring the ways

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<sup>2</sup> Foreword to *Mother Love*: “An Intact World” xii.

<sup>3</sup> Dove says in the same part of the interview that “[s]ince Rilke had written sonnets to Orpheus, I decided to write sonnets to Demeter,” and that she was “...tired of all the male gods...” (23).

<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Dove uses another word to describe the poems in *Mother Love* that do not conform to convention: “nontraditional” (Smith 34).

in which I could work that structure into contemporary settings was very productive.<sup>5</sup>

Here Dove acknowledges that the repressed was indeed the source for narrative in this book, even though she initially believed the poems that became *Mother Love* were practice with a particular form of language, that of the sonnet, a form other American poets, such as Auden, cummings, McKay, and Berryman, among others, have found engaging. Since the sonnet form was introduced into Renaissance England poetry, its form has been subject to certain variations in stanzaic, metric, and rhyme schemes. Given Dove's penchant for interrogating poetic traditions and conventions and claiming her own particular position in relationship to them, it is not surprising that she would write sonnets that both work within the conventions and constitute permutations of the conventions and tradition. Several *Mother Love* sonnets conform to the conventional Petrarchan octave and sestet form, two to the Shakespearean three quatrain and couplet form.<sup>6</sup> Reversed sonnets, a dialogue sonnet, an extended crown of sonnets cycle are some of the other sonnet forms that appear in the *Mother Love* sequence. Like other of the American poets who have worked with the sonnet form, in her sonnets, Dove abandons the conventional governing principles of rhyme and metric schemes. Those poems in the book that are not sonnets proper all constitute variations on the sonnet form, some in almost oblique ways, all with different degrees of formal and thematic complexity. Additionally, their positioning within a sequence of sonnets questions, and emphasizes, their relationship to the sonnet form. For this reason, I characterize the book as a sonnet sequence.<sup>7</sup> It maps out the poet's work

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<sup>5</sup> Bellin 23-4.

<sup>6</sup> Those that follow the exact Petrarchan are: "Party Dress for a First Born" (8), "Persephone, Falling" (9), "The Search" (10), and "Breakfast of Champions" (18) in Section II; "Afield" (50) in Section V; "Political" (55) in Section VI; and the opening sonnet (67) of the "Her Island" sonnet cycle that comprises Section VII. Two follow the exact Shakespearean: "Golden Oldie" (19) in Section II, and "Blue Days" (45) in Section VI.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Cushman, in his essay on *Mother Love*, reads two of the thirty-five poems in the book (he counts both the seven section "Persephone in Hell" and the eleven section "Her Island" as single poems) as "...bear[ing] no family resemblance to the sonnet." Those two are "Persephone in Hell" and "Lost

struggling with principles of conventional sonnet form and of free verse in paradoxical dialectic, yielding Dove's contribution to the body of sonnet permutations spawned since the sonnet entered Western poetic tradition.<sup>8</sup> In Dove's foreword to *Mother Love*, "An Intact World," she writes of the "chaos... lurking outside" (xi) the form of the sonnet, and the poet "... constantly bumping up against Order" (xii) in the sonnet. For Dove, that is one of the great thrills of writing poetry, which she characterizes elsewhere as the "'friction' between the beauty of a poetic form and a difficult or painful subject."<sup>9</sup> The Demeter/Persephone myth, involving as it does the separation of the daughter from the mother, provides Dove with such a subject. The beauty of the sonnet form, as well as its challenges, surely accounts for its attractions for those poets, including Dove, through the centuries from the Renaissance era on, who have worked and played with its offerings.

Chaos resides at the borders of the hybrid double sonnet "Heroes." Its pressures shape the poem as simultaneously the poem explores and expresses the shape, the form, of those pressures. The opening poem of the volume, and the only poem in Section 1, "Heroes" proceeds through nine tercet stanzas to its one line final stanza for a total of twenty-eight lines. This total is one of the double sonnet elements. The poem makes four sonnet turns—after the first two tercets; after the first line of the fourth tercet; at the end of the seventh tercet; and, lastly, part way through the penultimate stanza, in a sonnet form gone as awry as the world it contains. It is the turn of the sonnet that animates the

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Brilliance." He works from the notion that "the key to Dove's sonnets lies not in accentual-syllabic meter or regular rhyming but in their various arrangements based on the number fourteen" (132). As I have noted in the text, I read all the poems in the book as sonnet forms or variations thereof. Such a reading in part involves considering line number, but utilizes the "keys" of sonnet turn and strophic form.

<sup>8</sup> Cushman sees the relationship between the traditional sonnet form and free verse as oppositional rather than dialectical. He says: "...those who insist on reading Dove's sonnets against Petrarchan or Shakespearean models may see them as broken shards inherited by late twentieth-century skepticism and irony. But those who read *Mother Love* against its author's tendency to write free verse will find themselves surprised by how tenaciously Dove clings to her formal talisman against disintegration" (132). I read the poems *alongside* the traditional forms, and read no skepticism or irony in their use.

<sup>9</sup> Baym et. al. 2771.



dialectical relationship between the opening Petrarchan octave or Shakespearean quatrains and their respective closing sestet and couplet. A change of some sort is signaled, and the sonnet moves to counterpoint, in form and meaning. The counterpoint exists variously in ways such as statement and counterstatement, observation and amplifying reflection, containment and release, the rising and falling or increase and decrease of tensions. In the poem which opens *Mother Love*, Dove animates the sonnet turn—a move often characterized as one into resolution—into paradox of resolution, wherein chaos both threatens and ensures, gathers and is unraveled. Near the end of “Heroes,” “[a]lready the story’s starting to unravel” (4), Dove informs us. Unraveled, it is the poetry that follows “Heroes.” To continue on in the *Mother Love* sequence is to follow the story unraveling through to the story’s end, where in the last sonnet of the seventh and last section of the book, the crown of sonnets cycle “Her Island,” “no story’s ever finished; it just goes/on, unnoticed in the dark that’s all/around us: blazed stones, the ground closed” (77), over the story Dove tells here.

It is through a second person voice that Dove initiates that story in “Heroes,” speaking to herself, to Persephone, to Demeter. She begins:

A flower in a weedy field;  
make it a poppy. You pick it.  
Because it begins to wilt

you run to the nearest house  
to ask for a jar of water.  
The woman on the porch starts (3)

The last line of the second tercet prepares the turn, the first disintegration of the integrity of the experience, and of the sonnet form, as it enjambes into the first line of the next tercet. “The woman on the porch starts,” perhaps at seeing this stranger running toward her house. But no, she starts “screaming”—“you’ve plucked the last poppy/in her miserable garden, the one/that gave her the strength//to rise!..” (3). The world starts to unravel in the poem: “...It’s too late for apologies/though you go through the motions, offering trinkets and a juicy spot in the written history.” The subject quickly becomes complicated, cannot

develop itself through an octave or three-quatrain set of lines. How to stop this disintegration, this complication presented by the woman approached for water to succor the flower begun to wilt and die—is the need of this sonnet, in form as well as narrative.

Since it's "too late for apologies," at the beginning of the fourth tercet, other action must be offered to stave off, to counter, the gathering chaos, given that the "juicy spot in the written history/she wouldn't live to read, anyway" will not suffice as antidote to what has been unleashed in the poem thus far. The antidote, the sonnet turn on the second line of the fifth tercet (the fourteenth line of the poem), merely heightens the tension:

So you strike her, she hits  
her head on a white boulder,  
  
and there's nothing to be done  
but break the stone into gravel  
to prop up the flower in the stolen jar  
  
you have to take along,  
because you're a fugitive now  
and you can't leave clues.

An innocent act, "plucking a flower in a weedy field," becomes a transgression, but of what, is yet uncertain. The breakdown of the world contained in this broken octave in which stone is broken up (to be sown in various poems throughout the book)<sup>10</sup> continues. Surely the woman's head is broken against the white boulder, and the one addressed and the poem itself must make a "break" for it, for a sonnet turn that offers some release, some resolution. The next four lines offer possibility of release and bode against it:

Already the story's starting to unravel,  
the villagers stirring as your heart  
pounds into your throat. O why

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<sup>10</sup> For example, it reappears in "Breakfast of Champions" (Section II), as "stones are what I sprinkle among the chaff" (18) when the speaker in the sonnet pours herself "the recommended bowlful" of morning cereal; in "Persephone in Hell" (Section III), as "the stone chasms of the City of Lights" (23) the contemporary Persephone figure descends into. In "Lost Brilliance" (Section V), it appears in the Greek myth Persephone's recollection of the passageway to the Underworld: "that corridor drenched in shadow,/sweat of centuries steeped into stone" (51). And it is clearly, implicitly there in "everywhere temples or pieces of them" (73) in "Her Island" (Section VII) as description of the ancient Greek ruins of Sicily.

did you pick that idiot flower? (3-4)

The poem urges toward release from accumulating disaster in the movement of “starting to unravel,” even as the heart constricts the throat in counter-movement. Even as resolution will be offered in “Heroes,” the story is beginning to unravel into its book length sonnet sequence form beyond this “strange”<sup>11</sup> hybrid double sonnet that must reach through four turns to complete itself. The poem turns to its fourth, final sonnet turn, its “resolution,” its release from a merely horrific series of events, in the last three lines of the poem. It answers the sonnet’s question about itself—“why?”: “Because it was the last one/and you knew//it was going to die” (4).

Various metaphors have been invoked to describe the “turn” of the sonnet. Mary Oliver writes of “the ‘turn’ between octave and sestet, as though back into a mirror.”<sup>12</sup> Oliver’s metaphor suggests a moment and a space at once both finite and infinite, the turn “as though back into a mirror” moving the poem to an image mirrored back from before the turn. Paul Fussell describes the sonnet turn as the space or moment between inhalation and exhalation; also a similar space of moment before muscular contraction and release.<sup>13</sup> The turn back into the mirror of the poem offers a release in the apprehension of “the extravagance and yet applicability of its [the poem’s] imagery” that Mary Oliver admires in the sonnet.<sup>14</sup>

There is extravagance in the imagery in “Heroes.” In the gesture of the woman on the porch “screaming” just because “you’ve plucked the last poppy/in her miserable garden.” In the fact that a flower “in a weedy field” gives the woman “the strength every

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<sup>11</sup> I choose “strange” over “nontraditional” in describing “Heroes,” here because of its resonances with “estranged” and “strained,” both apt words to describe this poem’s sonnet form in relationship to traditional sonnet forms.

<sup>12</sup> *Rules for the Dance* 51.

<sup>13</sup> 116.

<sup>14</sup> *Rules for the Dance* 51.

morning//to rise!” In the offer of a “juicy spot in the written history.” In the violent response to the woman screaming. On each sonnet turn, the poem responds to itself; looks back at itself again, as if into a mirror; and sings itself (Dove reminds readers in her foreword that “‘Sonnet’ literally means ‘little song’” (xi)) onward to its final sonnet turn. In its last three lines the poem recognizes, apprehends, the Oliverian “applicability” of its images to its development. The poem releases itself from complete disaster and degeneration. The “flower in a weedy field” of the first line of the poem was “going to die,” and it has not, because it has been propped up among gravel bits in a “stolen jar.” It is taken along by the one addressed, who has become “fugitive now” near the end of the poem. It is carried by the poem itself, which also becomes a “fugitive” along its way, and which “can’t leave clues,” although the clues to its sonnet identity are embedded within it, as are the clues to the flower’s and stolen jar’s origins.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout *Mother Love*, Demeter, Persephone, and poet cycle through each other’s voices and experiences in various of the poems. Alison Booth speaks of “a confusion of voices, she, I, we, you, he,” in the book, and says, “[f]rom one poem to the next, and sometimes within a poem, the reader is on her toes to figure out who is speaking.”<sup>16</sup> In “Heroes,” Dove speaks to Demeter, Persephone, herself, in overlapping discourse. She re-plays (and reminds Demeter and herself as mother of) the loss of innocence that is Persephone’s experience in the Demeter/Persephone myth, and the separation loss of the daughter, which all mothers experience as daughters themselves. To herself as poet, on the brink of a long sonnet sequence, and to Persephone on the brink of plucking the flower that will cause the ground to open under her, she says: this is how it

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<sup>15</sup> “[M]ake it a poppy” Dove says in the opening tercet of “Heroes.” Helene Foley notes, in her discussion of flower associations in ancient Greece, that the narcissus was believed to be both an aphrodisiac and a soporific. The poppy, known to have soporific qualities, is yet another clue.

<sup>16</sup> “Abduction and Other Severe Pleasures: Rita Dove’s *Mother Love*” 127. I find a *profusion* of such voices in the book, but do not find “a confusion of voices” that includes Hades, or other male figures.

happens. It is a refrain Dove plays and enacts throughout the book of “mother-goddess, daughter-consort, and poet...struggling to sing” their experiences “in their chains.” Directly in “Persephone, Falling” (Section II), she says: “This is how easily the pit/opens. This is how one foot sinks into the ground” (9); and, in “Persephone in Hell” (Section III):

Which way is bluer?  
...  
And if I refuse this being  
which way then?  
...  
This is how the pit opens  
...  
This is how one foot  
sinks into the ground (28-9)

murmurs the melded voice of all three—Demeter, Persephone, and poet—as a contemporary Persephone figure negotiates the “stone chasms of the City of Light” (23).

The flower in “Heroes” is stolen from Persephone’s story. In the myth, it is the “[o]ne narcissus among the other ordinary beautiful/flowers” Persephone “pull[s],” (“Persephone Falling”) in the “flowering meadow” which opens to “an abyss” when Hades takes Persephone (“Statistic: The Witness,” II, 14). The stolen jar that holds the flower is the sonnet form, stolen from tradition by this late twentieth century American poet. In it, Dove places the blossom of the stolen Demeter/Persephone myth—“the really great tales are stolen by other cultures and changed to fit their new surroundings,” says Dove here.<sup>17</sup> To keep the flower and its myth alive Dove must reinterpret them. In her range of work with various poetic forms throughout her poetic opus, and particularly in *Mother Love*, she also illustrates her impulse to steal what she considers great poetic forms from other cultures and eras, and fit them to the contemporary world as she experiences it. Just as she infuses the classic Greek myth with the “reinterpretation” Norman O. Brown says gives “meaning to life as experienced by the poet and his age,”<sup>18</sup> to keep the sonnet form alive, she

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<sup>17</sup> In Bellin 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Theogony* 35.

reinterprets it in ways that give it a new form shaped by her and her age, That form is one not as predictable and orderly as that of her Renaissance progenitors, but one that still allows the poet to sing within its formal chains. The broken stone in the stolen jar in “Heroes” bespeaks, among other things, the broken up sonnet form of itself and of many of the sonnets in *Mother Love*.

The rites of passage both Demeter and Persephone, mother and daughter, must make in the daughter’s separation from the mother, requires a consideration of “*Which way is bluer?/.../And if I refuse this being/which way then?..*” *Mother Love* documents Dove’s Demeter and Persephone responses to the choices posed in their different rites of passage. It also documents Dove’s response as poet to the questions posed of her by both her subject and the form she chooses: “[W]hich way then” is the question she must constantly respond to in writing the sonnet form that as a “technical exercise” led her to her subject to begin with. As Demeter “strikes out against the Law,”<sup>19</sup> in her refusal to nurture the Earth when Persephone is taken from her, Dove strikes out, although not in grief or rage as Demeter does, against the Law of sonnet conventions in her variations on those conventions. Throughout the book, the way is in following the “one foot” (as poetic as literal in its metrical reference) into the opening pit of the abyss that constantly reasserts itself before a poet as she writes. Following the “one foot sink[ing] into the ground,” she goes deeper and deeper into that abyss in “Heroes.” Each sonnet turn is made in answer to “[w]hich way is bluer,” “which way then,” until finally meaning emerges after the last sonnet turn. This twentieth century hybrid double sonnet begins the reanimation of the Demeter/Persephone myth, which “was going to die,” if left unsung, if not stolen and changed “to fit [its] new surroundings.”<sup>20</sup> The “‘friction’ between the beauty” of poetic

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<sup>19</sup> “An Intact World” xii.

<sup>20</sup> In Bellin 21.

form, the sonnet form in this case, and the “difficult, painful subject”<sup>21</sup> of daughter/mother separation lies ahead in *Mother Love*.

“Heroes” offers up a template for Dove’s subject and formal concerns in the *Mother Love* sonnet sequence. Its title acknowledges the realm of the mythic within. Myths are about heroes, about heroic struggle, about the relationship between mortals and gods. Its title, as title of the “strange” (one might even say estranged) first sonnet of a sonnet sequence, acknowledges relationship to the final heroic couplet that marks conventional Shakespearean sonnet form. And to heroic verse—meter of the epic, which always involves a hero’s struggles, and sometimes relationships between mortals and the gods. At the same time, the formal composition of “Heroes” indicates its variation on, and estrangement from, both the sonnet form and heroic meter. The title of the first poem in *Mother Love* reminds readers that Dove is always ever mindful of the various ongoing “grand” conversations regarding poetic tradition, formal as well as thematic (those insufficient terms that render asunder what is not divided in poetry), participating in them with delight, discernment, and wide range; picking and choosing the elements most useful to her particular poetic projects.

The first poem in *Mother Love* proclaims that “[a]lready the story’s starting to unravel.” Its title and formal composition proclaim: “break the stone into gravel”; use the “gravel/to prop up the flower.” The integrity of the stone has been broken in one way, maintained in another through its new use, another paradoxical dialectic of Dove’s *ars poetica* in the book. After making “a flower in a weedy field/...a poppy”—when the myth says it’s a narcissus, and pulling it up—when the myth has already revealed what comes next is disaster, “[i]t’s too late for apologies” to myth tradition, “and there’s nothing to be done, but not “leave clues.” Of course Dove does leave clues—to the story of poetic tradition that is starting to unravel. Even though she’s “a fugitive now”—stolen jar with

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<sup>21</sup> Baym et. al. 2771.

flower propped up by gravel in writing hand, the poem is replete with clues—the bits of myth, the title, the broken up sonnet form. Already the story's starting to unravel, the story of poetic tradition written into immutable stone, and another one is being written.

The epigraph to Section I is from James Hillman's *The Dream and the Underworld*: "One had to choose, and who would choose the horror?"(1). Dove talks about the book with Steven Bellin, how Hillman sees the dream:

...as a realm with its own rules, much like the Greeks' idea of the underworld. Not quite an anti-cosmos; a parallel universe, an actual world deeper than we can allow our feelings to go...but it exists, it's there always, waiting. Myths tap into that well. (22)

Dove taps into that well in "Heroes." She chooses the "horror." She pulls the flower that takes her to the underworld. Folklore, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, and myths have in common the kind of horror invoked by Hillman's question. They all speak to the inevitable traumas and struggles of human experience. They all function as talisman against the "horror." It is not surprising then that the epigraph to Section II of *Mother Love* is a *Mother Goose* rhyme. Indeed, Dove tells Jesse Kornbluth that *Mother Goose* was one of her early literary influences, alongside Shakespeare among others of course.<sup>22</sup> The paralleling of her *Mother Love* with *Mother Goose* is an exquisite and instructional sleight of word on Dove's part. The poet who, as "a private literary joke,"<sup>23</sup> writes her name at least once into the poetry of each of her books,<sup>24</sup> means for readers to take palpable pleasure in this poetic play. She also means readers to make the connection between *Mother Goose* and *Mother Love* in other ways. Called up are the connections among poetry, nursery rhymes, and

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<sup>22</sup> "An Interview with Ms. Dove" 15.

<sup>23</sup> Dove in Walsh 147. Stephen Cushman notes that this gesture also participates in tradition, in a "long and venerable history," and mentions the play of "will" in Shakespeare's sonnets 135 and 136.

<sup>24</sup> It appears in section II of "Persephone in Hell," in Demeter's voice, grieving the loss of Persephone: "my dove my snail" (25).



myth. Add those to all the other resonances, connections, and influences the book also expresses.

The sections of *Mother Love* following “Heroes” “unravel” the Demeter/Persephone story. All of them except the final, seventh section, have as their primary focus various strands of the myth. The seventh focuses on the poet’s process of working out the meaning for her of the myth. In Section II begins the direct conflation of the ancient Greek Demeter and Persephone figures and the late twentieth century mother and daughter figures who appear in poems in Section II through Section VI, poet folding into all of them sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely. A twentieth-century Persephone appears prior to her fall in the first two poems. In “Primer” (7), she is in the sixth grade; suffers school yard taunts regarding her body—“Mrs. Stringbean!” and her Dovian learnedness—“Brainiac!” ; presciently resists her mother’s rescue (as she will do again once she’s living with Hades in Dove’s version of the myth)—“...my five-foot zero mother drove up/in her Caddie to shake them down to size./Nothing could get me into that car”; and declares in the poem’s last two lines, “I’d show them all: I would grow up.” (Part of the story unraveling out of “Heroes” is Persephone’s growing up, her coming of age sexually. In *Mother Love*, Persephone achieves the transition from stringbean, brainiac girlhood under protectorate of her “five-foot zero mother,” to separation from that mother to womanhood through her sexual liaison with Hades.)

In “Party Dress for a First Born” (8), at once the ancient Greek figure and the contemporary figure of “Primer,” Persephone waits, a divided self “ill at ease on the bed,” to go down to a lawn party, where “men stride like elegant scissors across the lawn/to the women arrayed there, petals waiting to loosen.” On the brink of sexual awakening, in that liminal state of curiosity, burgeoning desire, and concomitant repulsion, she recalls in the opening octave of this Petrarchan form sonnet the earlier comfort and safety of her mother’s presence: “I ran to my mother, waiting radiant/as a cornstalk at the edge of the field,/nothing else mattered: the world stood still.” (Here the ancient Greek and late

twentieth-century Persephones conflate through the mother figure “radiant/as a cornstalk at the edge of the field,” which invokes Demeter, goddess of the corn.) Persephone is simultaneously drawn to the safety of childhood, and to the “horror” of sexual awakening, lying on the bed “thinking of:/nothing,” as if that could stave off what is imminent. The Oliverian mirror function of the sonnet turn reveals in its look backward the closing sestet’s images that indicate the sources of the divided girl images in the octave. The “elegant scissors” men and “petals waiting to loosen” women are the opening images of Persephone’s musings in the sestet. She considers next her entry into the party, once again experiencing that oppositional tension within herself: “When I step out, disguised in your blushing skin,/they will nudge each other to get a peek/and I will smile, all the while wishing them dead.” Her mother calls her to join the party in the last line of the poem: “Mother’s calling. Stand up: it will be our secret.” In another moment of prescient recognition, Persephone understands what her mother also understands—and wishes to protect her from—sexual knowledge and experience.<sup>25</sup> In “The Bistro Styx,” in the book’s fourth section, Demeter visits her daughter in Paris, where she cohabits with Hades. It is there that she understands she has “lost” (42) Persephone, her “blighted child,” a “wary aristocratic mole” (40), who answers her query: ““But are you happy?”” with an immediate whispered non sequitor: ““What? You know, Mother’—//.../one really should try the fruit here” (42). Persephone understands the secret she heard in her mother’s call the night of the party. She cannot answer “yes” to Demeter’s question. Choosing sexual desire does not necessarily obviate the oppositional tension of pre-adolescent longing for and fear of sexual impulses, nor lead to happiness.

Hades, “sprung out of the earth/on his glittering terrible/carriage...,” abducts Persephone—this time more twentieth century in the opening octave and more ancient

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Graves states that Demeter’s priestesses “initiate brides and bridegrooms into the secrets of the couch” (*The Greek Myths* 89).

Greek in the closing sestet—in the third poem of Section II, “Persephone, Falling” (9). As in the Greek myth, so in the poem. Persephone wanders off from her friends and bends to pick “one narcissus among the ordinary beautiful/flowers”; the earth opens and Hades pulls her down into the Underworld to become his consort. He comes to “claim... his due.” In the myth, Zeus, Persephone’s father, promises his daughter (offspring of his union with Demeter, his sister), to his brother, Hades, lord of the Underworld. Persephone begins her initiation into sexual experience and Demeter hers into facing the question of daughter loss: “Are you really all over with? How done/is gone?” (“The Search” 11)

The next two poems belong to Demeter. In “The Search” (10), she is “[b]lown apart by loss” of Persephone. “Wander[ing] the neighborhood hatless, breasts/swinging under a ratty sweater, crusted/mascara blackening her gaze...” and “[w]inter came early.” At the loss of Persephone, in the myth, Demeter wanders the earth, grieving, neglecting her duties as goddess of the cornfield, and the natural world beings to die off. Helene Foley notes that “...Demeter takes on signs of human mourning: change of clothing, the tearing of the veil, the refusal to eat and bathe.”<sup>26</sup> She continues her relentless grieving, in “Protection” (11), asking her absent daughter: “Are you having a good time?/Are you having a time at all?”; and herself: “Is there such/a thing as a warning?” “Are you really all over with? How done is gone?.” Next the poetry returns to Persephone. In “The Narcissus Flower” (12), Persephone recounts “..the way I could see my own fingers and hear/myself scream as the blossom incinerated,” how “...nothing could chasten/the plunge,/this man/adamant as a knife easing into//the humblest crevice.” She discovers what can be made of loss of sexual innocence: “The mystery is, you can eat fear/before fear eats you,//you can.../..become a queen/whom nothing surprises.” “Persephone Abducted” (13), tells the rape version of the myth (one which Dove revises in the next section): “She cried out for Mama, who did not/hear...”; “She left us singing in the field, oblivious/to all but the ache

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<sup>26</sup> Foley 37.

of our own bent backs.” Demeter enters this poem as Persephone transmutes into her: “She left with a wild eye thrown back,/she left with curses, rage/that withered her features to a hag’s.” For Dove in this poem, part of the Greek myth that survives intact to this day is “No one can tell a mother how to act:/there are no laws when laws are broken, no names/to call upon.”

Of the twelve poems in this section, only “Statistic: The Witness” (14), and “Grief: The Council” (15-16) are not sonnet forms proper. Of the other ten, three use the Petrarchan strophic form, one the Shakespearean, and all the others are variations on those two forms, in which stanza breaks vary from the conventions. These two poems are also the only two in the section that do not speak from the subjective experiences of Demeter, Persephone, mother, or daughter. Their voices do not cycle continuously and expansively through the other voices in this section. Their “little songs” require extension to be heard. In the first of these two, a girl in the field with Persephone when Hades takes her gives witness to what she saw—“...she is there/screaming...,” and—“...his watch, the two ashen ovals/etched on her upturned sandals.” She also gives witness to the experience of the one who witnesses, an experience as irrevocable as Persephone’s or Demeter’s, and as much a loss of innocence as Persephone’s: “Now I must walk this faithless earth/which cannot readjust an abyss/into flowering meadow.” The poem takes the form of a sestet followed by two septets, thus adding six lines to the conventional fourteen line sonnet. For the witness, witnessing is conflation with, transmutation into, what is witnessed. The first sestet—

No matter where I turn, she is there  
screaming. No matter how  
I run, pause to catch a breath—  
until I am the one screaming  
as the drone of an engine overtakes  
the afternoon—

is her subjective experience of Hades’ abduction of Persephone. The poem turns to the following septet, reaching for release: “I know I should stop looking, do/as my mother says—turn my head/to the wall and tell Jesus,” unsuccessfully. The poem turns again for

release to the final septet. She too will learn what Persephone learned: “The mystery is, you can eat fear/before fear eats you” (“The Narcissus Flower” 12). Since she has to “walk this faithless earth,” (as Demeter does also) she “will walk until I reach/green oblivion . . . then/I will lie down in its kindness,/in the bottomless lull of her arm.” In this last image of the poem, Dove invokes Hecate, Mother Earth, and one of the witnesses, in addition to the other Greek maidens in the field, to Persephone’s cry as she is being dragged downward by Hades

“Grief: The Council” is a variation on a dialogue sonnet. It is tripled, its stanzas vary in length from one line to six, and it falls one line short of the forty-two a tripled sonnet would have. It is divided into two sets of seven stanzas that alternate between the voice of the council—a group of women, (members it seems, of a church council as twentieth century resonances of the Greek pantheon who also meet to discuss the problem of Demeter’s neglect of her duties), concerned about the grieving mother’s inability or unwillingness to heal—and an unidentifiable voice speaking from the mythic realm. One council member says: “I told her: enough is enough”; another, “I bet she ain’t took in a word I said...”; yet another, “I say we gotta see her through” (15). Murmuring in between council members’ voices, the voice from the mythic realm describes Demeter’s world after Persephone’s departure from it: “*soot drifting up from hell/dusting the kale’s/green tresses, the corn’s green sleeve’/.../and no design*” (15) There is no design to Demeter’s grief yet. Ideas of the council do not suffice. She cannot “help some other unfortunate child”(15) as palliative, as the part of the myth enacted in the next poem demonstrates also, so deep and punishing is her grief. Nor will “Sister Jeffries” taking “one/of [her] Mason jars, something/sweetish, tomatoes or bell pepper,” or “Miz Earl” taking her to a movie—a complicated plot should distract her” (16) serve to ease Demeter’s loss. The resolution in the myth, part of the year to have Persephone with her, part without—cyclic design of loss and return, is yet to come. For this reason too, the design is off in this sonnet. In the last three poems of the section, Dove returns to recognizable sonnet forms, the last two

following Petrarchan and Shakespearean form respectively; the one following “Grief: The Council,” a double sonnet unbalanced between an opening twelve line stanza and a closing sixteen line one—the book’s title poem, “Mother Love,”

In “Mother Love” (17), Dove retells the Demophoon part of the Demeter/Persephone myth, in which the infant boy, Demophoon, in Demeter’s care so that he might grow immortal, dies. This is the part of the myth that goes untold. This is the part of mother love that goes untold, how it can become mutilated, and damaging. This is the *Mother Love* poem to match the *Mother Goose* rhyme that is epigraph to this section of the book. Its psychic horror matches that of the rhyme:

Baby, baby, if he hears you  
As he gallops past the house,  
Limb from limb at once he’ll tear you,  
Just as pussy tears a mouse.

And he’ll beat you, beat you, beat you,  
And he’ll beat you all to pap,  
And he’ll eat you, eat you, eat you,  
Every morsel snap, snap, snap. (5)

In Dove’s poem, the child’s mother, Metaneira, spies on Demeter as she performs her nightly ritual of burying him—“her only male child”—in the fire to ensure his immortality. When Demeter hears the mother’s crying and lamenting what she believes is Demeter’s betrayal, Demeter becomes enraged, and abandons the boy, pulling him out of the fire and throwing him down. Grown accustomed to Demeter’s care, he cannot be kept alive by that of his mother and sisters. At the poem’s end Demeter says,

...Oh, I know it  
looked damning: at the hearth a muttering crone  
bent over a baby sizzling on a spit  
as neat as a Virginia ham. Poor human—  
to scream like that, to make me remember.

Demophoon, offered to Demeter “for nursing,/(a smattering of flesh, noisy and ordinary),” has helped her to forget. She decides to “save him” from mortal death. “Any woman knows the remedy for grief/is being needed,” the Demeter/poet voice says earlier in the poem. Metaneira makes Demeter remember her loss, feel her grief. When she cries out at

the sight of her son “laid... on the smoldering embers” where Demeter is “sealing his juices slowly so he might/be cured to perfection,” it is her scream that makes Demeter remember her lost daughter, not only as it recalls Persephone’s cry as Hades grabs her. Hearing Demophoon’s mother cry at the belief that she had lost him makes Demeter return to the deep grief of losing her child. The child Demeter dedicates herself to, she abandons when his mother’s scream recalls Demeter’s greater love lost, Persephone.

In the myth, Demeter persists and progresses toward Persephone. So too in the last two sonnets in Section II. In “Breakfast of Champions (18),” Demeter has “crossed a hemisphere,/worked my way through petals and sunlight/to find a place fit for mourning” in ancient Greece. Across time to the present, she’ll “dive into a grateful martini tonight, eye to eye with the olive adrift in cool ether.” In “Golden Oldie” (19) the twentieth century mother figure sits in her car in her driveway, listening to a tune of the radio—“*Baby, where did our love go?*”—that has her “swaying/at the wheel like a blind pianist...” and remembering when she first listened to that song. She goes back to when she heard the song as “...a lament/I greedily took in//without a clue who my lover/might be, or where to start looking.” She goes back to her own Persephone experiences, her own pull toward sexual awakening.

Each successive section of *Mother Love* after this (four total) that deals with the Demeter/Persephone myth directly is a similar imbrication of, and play with, a myriad of poetic sources and traditions. “Persephone in Hell” is the title of the sonnet sequence divided into seven numbered parts that comprises Section III of *Mother Love*. Each of these poems constitute variations on the sonnet form, some in almost oblique ways, all with different degrees of formal and thematic complexity. A contemporary Persephone speaks in these poems of her experience in the Underworld, which is represented as late twentieth century Paris. “I was not quite twenty when I first went down/into the stone chasms of the City of Lights” begins “Persephone in Hell” (I, 23). Occasionally, Demeter’s voice speaks across time from Olympus and the Greek world then, entering Persephone’s

poems. A contemporary Hades speaks to Persephone: “I am waiting” (VII, 33), in counterpoint, in call and response, in the last two, dialogue sonnets. Part of Dove’s version of the myth is that Persephone seeks out Hades in this section, as he seeks her. This story of sexual awakening is not about rupture alone, it is about “Contact” (V, 30) and Persephone’s sexual desire, the kind Demeter recalls while sitting in the car listening to that song from her beginning womanhood. (Foley notes that later versions of the myth, including one by Virgil, involve Persephone falling in love with Hades or at the very least finding his offers attractive enough not to resist.)<sup>27</sup> In Dove’s version, Persephone becomes a late twentieth century “fugitive” (I, 23), a fugitive from the maternal protectorate, about which and whom she declares: “I was doing what she didn’t need to know./I was doing everything and feeling nothing” (II, 25). She wanders Paris’s streets, bistros, artists’ studios, hip soirees, in this third section of the book, and in the fourth as well.

According to Dove, for Persephone, prior to meeting Hades, “There was love, of course. Mostly boys:/a flat faced engineering student from Missouri,/a Texan flaunting his teaspoon of Cherokee blood” (II, 25). She may be innocent of the kind of relationship she forms with Hades, but she is not sexually innocent when she meets him. At a party where she is looking for “a *divertissement*” and the “next one through that gate,/woman or boy, will get/the full-court press of my ennui” (VI, 30), she meets Hades. Flirtation and the undertone of sexual yearning permeate the penultimate dialogue sonnet, in a movement back and forth between Persephone and Hades. Each quotidian exchange is underspoken in interior voice, as the sexual courting of American student (Persephone) and Parisian artist (Hades) progresses according to ritual. When Hades approaches Persephone with “*Puis-je vous offrir mes services?*”, she thinks to herself, “Sotto voce, his inquiry/.../Standard nicety, probably.” Before she responds, Hades whispers, “*Or myself, if you are looking,*”

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<sup>27</sup> 60.



and says to himself, “I’m sure she doesn’t understand” (31). Persephone does not understand the French, but she does understand the nature of her party banter exchange with Hades. Her couplet response is “Yes. I’m ... sure he’s here somewhere./*Here you are.*”

In the last dialogue sonnet, Persephone and Hades speak to one another the soundless, intimate language of sexual longing that has none of the archness or calculation of their initial meeting. This is a beautiful poem. Sibilance proliferates, sensuality proliferating throughout and through an accumulation of soft, longing s’s, like sighs. Just as Persephone becomes enfolded in the last poem in Section II, Demeter’s poem, here too Demeter becomes enfolded in Persephone’s last poem in Section III. She enters Persephone’s four last lines—her four last sighs, before Hades sighs back the last line of the poem—“you are on your way.” (Interestingly, Hades’ voice is set in smaller character type, emphasizing that this is Persephone’s experience, her subjectivity the poem expresses.) The exchange goes thus:

be still, mother whispers	through whispers the sighing
and let sorrow travel	through sighing the darkness
be still she whispers	I am waiting
and light will enter	you are on your way. (33)

Persephone’s poem signals at its end a turn within the sonnet sequence similar to that of Demeter’s last poem in Section II. Persephone entering Demeter’s “Golden Oldie” marks a turn in the book—a return to Persephone’s experience. Demeter’s entering Persephone’s here marks a return to Demeter’s experience in the book in the next section, (albeit not until the last poem, “The Bistro Styx”). Both the maternal presence in Persephone’s poem and the return to female adolescent experience in Demeter’s poem mark the changes wrought in each that connect them, daughter and mother, to one another, even as the daughter chooses a lover and in so doing separates from her mother. In “Golden Oldie” Demeter remembers with pleasure that female adolescent longing and desire in herself that, now, in her

daughter, draws Persephone to Hades in separation from Demeter. In the moment of that memory she is conjoined with her daughter in collective female experience. In section VII of “Persephone in Hell,” at the moment Persephone turns from her mother and toward Hades, she also turns to her mother and Demeter enters the experience, whispering to her daughter her female wisdom regarding sexual initiation—“the secrets of the couch” as Robert Graves characterizes the knowledge of Demeter’s followers.<sup>28</sup> Once again, as in “Golden Oldie,” mother and daughter conjoin in collective female experience

In Section IV of *Mother Love*, conflation of eras and poet and goddesses also occurs. Three fourteen line contemporary variations on the sonnet form precede the last poem, “The Bistro Styx,” which is comprised of five Petrarchan-like sonnet sections. Mother and daughter meet for the first time since Persephone has left home for Paris in this poem. “Hades’ Pitch” recounts the moment of sexual consummation that lay ahead of the longing sigh lines of the last dialogue sonnet in “Persephone in Hell.” Persephone, ever connected to her mother, even in an act of separation, “...sighs/just as her mother aboveground stumbles, is caught/by the fetlock—bereft in an instant—/while the Great Man drives home his desire” (37). In “Wiederkehr” (38), Dove’s Persephone has learned she can return to Demeter, and realizes Hades “only wanted” her “for happiness,” so that he could “...watch the smile/begun in his eyes/end on the lips/his eyes caressed.” When Persephone says at the end of the poem that this is the reason “...why,/when the choice appeared,/I reached for it,” the title, “Wiederkehr,” the German word for “return,” signals that the choice is to return to Demeter. She chooses to return to her mother, even as she chooses sexual desire, as becomes clear in the two poems following. In this poem, Persephone eschews sexual connection in recognition of the power of maternal love—mother love, and her connection to it. Dove’s version of the myth runs parallel to the ancient Greek in this and the next poem.

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<sup>28</sup> 89.

In the ancient Greek myth, Demeter's mourning the loss of her daughter so disrupts the natural order of the world that the pantheon convenes and it is decided that Zeus will order Hades to return Persephone to her mother. If one has eaten any of the food of the Underworld, one cannot return to the human world. Persephone so grieves the loss of her mother that she had eats nothing during her time in the Underworld, and so is free to go when Zeus delivers Hades the ultimatum of the other gods. However, on her ascent back to the human world, she eats some pomegranate seeds, and seals her fate—to live part of each year with her mother (during which time the earth returns to fertility) and part with Hades (during which time the earth experiences winter's infertility).<sup>29</sup> In "Wiring Home" (39), Persephone sends a missive to Demeter, describing her experiences in Paris—how she negotiates the streets of Paris, "the wolves" who whistle, the "shopkeepers [who] inquire, "the beggar's cold cup,/until, turning a corner, you stand//staring: ambushed/by a window of canaries//bright as a thousand/golden narcissi," the flower of her ancient pull into the Underworld, and Dove's version of the pomegranate seed that ambushes Persephone's chances of returning to Demeter fully.

The choice Persephone has made in "Wiederkehr" is not a return from the Underworld, but rather a returning of her attention to her mother, who comes to Paris hoping to persuade Persephone to come home. Hades no longer has the hold he had on Persephone initially. She, having learned "you can eat fear/before fear eats you," has "become a queen" of the Underworld ("The Narcissus Flower" 12), skilled at negotiating Parisian streets alone. When Demeter and Persephone meet in "The Bistro Styx," the mother regards her daughter closely, noting her "mannered gauntness," noting that even though Persephone apologizes for being late, "she wasn't." She deplores her daughter's life with Hades as the artist's lover and model, but "hazard[s]/a motherly smile to keep

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<sup>29</sup> Different versions of the myth attribute the number of seeds as anywhere from three to seven, marking off the months of Persephone's residence with her mother and with her father, according to the seasonal cycles of the region in which the myth is told.

from crying out—/Are you content to conduct your life/as a cliché and, what’s worse,//an anachronism, the brooding artist’s demimonde?” (40). When Demeter expresses an interest in seeing the studio, Persephone lets her mother know that the studio she shares with Hades is a sexualized realm and closed to Demeter, by issuing “[a] delicate rebuff”:

“Yes, if you wish...” ...

before the warning: “He dresses all  
in black now. Me, he drapes in blues and carmine—  
and even though I think it’s kinda cute,  
in company I tend toward more muted shades. (41)

Over dessert, as Persephone bites “into the starry rose of a fig.” Demeter asks, ““But are you happy?” Both “the starry rose of fig” and Persephone’s reply also allude to the pomegranate seeds she eats in the Underworld. For Dove, it is not mischance (as the pomegranate element of the myth suggests) that Persephone remains in the Underworld. “There comes a point when a mother can no longer protect her child, when the daughter must go her own way into womanhood,” Dove says in “An Intact World” (xi). That point has come in *Mother Love* in this poem. Persephone asserts it and Demeter recognizes it in her daughter’s answer: ““What? You know, Mother’—/.../’one should really try the fruit here,” as she thinks to herself, “*I’ve lost her*” and “call[s] for the bill” (42) in the last line of this poem.

Section V and Section VI contain poems that amplify the domain of female myth *Mother Love* explores. Up to this point, Dove has worked throughout the book with the timeless and the placeless in exploring the Demeter/Persephone myth as ancient Greece experienced it, and as it is “experienced by the poet and [her] age” (Brown 35). These two sections seem to involve Dove herself, sonneteer, turning back into the mirror of the book sonnet sequence and apprehending the “applicability of its imagery” Mary Oliver says the turn of a sonnet brings to recognition. While some of the seven sonnets or sonnet forms in Section V and the nine sonnets in VI have the Demeter and Persephone figures and the settings Dove has worked with in the second, third, and fourth sections, many of them do

not. Those that do not explore either the applicability of the Persephone/Demeter myth to other aspects of female experience beyond the mother daughter relationship in the poet's age, or, to the subject of poetry, as in Section VI. Those poems are set in places such as the American Southwest ("Blue Days" 45), the Mexico of the Toltec ruins of Teotihuacan ("Teotihuacan" (58) or Frida Kahlo ("Sonnet in Primary Colors" 47), twentieth century apartheid South Africa, ("Political" 55).

In preliterate cultures, folklore and myth presupposed that the audience held common beliefs about tribal origins and the relationship between mortals and gods. Some of Dove's sonnets about the Demeter/Persephone myth can be characterized as female folklore. By this, I mean not only that women, as daughters all and sometimes as mothers,<sup>30</sup> share the common experience that the Demeter/Persephone myth renders: separation of the daughter from the mother. (Dove does not presume a common belief about female experience on the part of women, but she does presume some common experience.) I mean also that the dirty joke about women that Mick tells in the sonnet "Blue Days" (45) and her noticing the "Tampax tubes" at the Agrigento city dump in one of the crown of sonnets cycle sonnets<sup>31</sup> speak to the lives of women, to their shared experience as subjects, not objects, (such as in a dirty joke, in which a Tampax might play a role, but does not in "Blue Days"). In the poetry before these sections, such instances as the sixth grade Persephone suffering the taunt of "*Mrs. Stringbean!*" ("Primer" 7) that tells her her body is insufficient; Demeter being raped and not being comforted but judged deserving by "Mrs. Franklin, ruling matron," who "sniff[s]" to other women in the community matron: "*Serves her right, the old mare*" ("The Search" 10); and Persephone learning how to endure the male gaze on the streets of Paris ("Wiring Home" 39) have already provided images that

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<sup>30</sup> The book's dedication page reads: "For my mother, To my daughter" (vii), poet in the liminal space between the two, as she is, in a different relationship, in the liminal space between Demeter and Persephone.

<sup>31</sup> "Her Island" 72.

extend beyond the original myth to the female folkloric. In Section V, all the poems are female folkloric. In addition to “Blue Days,” there is “Nature’s Itinerary” (46), a woman’s story of birth control pills and missed menses, punctuated with wry commentary many a woman would chuckle at—“I shouldn’t worry (I’m medically regulated)/but hell, I brought these thirty sanitary pads/all the way from Koln to Mexico,” and “Taking the pill is like using a safety net/but then, beforehand, having a beer—/a man’s invention to numb us so we/can’t tell which way the next wind’s blowing.” In “Exit” (49) there is the reference to the mother’s initiation story to her “blush[ing]” daughter, a story all mothers and daughters have their own particular experience of to recount—“when your mother told you/what it took to be a woman in this life.”

In Section VI, six sonnets mirror the applicability of the female folkloric images of the sections wholly focused on Persephone’s and Demeter’s experiences. Five feature elements of the ancient myth; one does not. “Used” (60) is a damning indictment and hilarious send up of the contemporary American tyranny of female body standards. It puts those standards in their place:

The conspiracy’s to make us thin. Size threes  
are all the rage, and skirts ballooning above twinkling knees  
are every man-child’s preadolescent dream.  
Tabula rasa. No slate’s *that* clean—

we’ve earned the navels sunk in grief  
when the last child emptied us of their brief  
interior light. Our muscles say *We have been used.*

As the sonnet turns, apprehending the applicablity of its images thus far, the speaker pokes fun at her own entanglement in the pressures of those standards—enacted in the sexual domain, and then bids a breezy farewell to being “used”:

Have you ever tried silk sheets? I did,  
persuaded by postnatal dread  
and a Macy’s clerk to bargain for more zip.  
We couldn’t hang on, slipped  
to the floor, and by morning the quilts  
had slid off, too. Enough of guilt—  
It’s hard work staying cool.

The pun on “cool” signals the release of the speaker’s entanglement. It’s hard work staying cool enough, detached enough from the culture’s standards, to love the “used” elements of one’s female body. Opting for it is the speaker’s release and the sonnet’s resolution.

Three of the four sonnets that focus on female folklore are also sonnets for which the subject is poetry, signaling Dove’s movement toward this as the governing subject in the last section of the book. Poetry and myth are the subject of the fourth sonnet. Every section of the *Mother Love* sonnet sequence opens itself up beforehand to the subject and further themes of the next. This fourth sonnet in Section VI, “Teotihuacan” (58), disentangles itself from the pattern of the other three by not making direct references to Demeter, Persephone, female folklore. It does make direct references to myth as Teotihuacan is the site of the Toltec ruins, visited in the poem by a “group of poets.” In the references to Teotihuacan and the touring poets, it opens itself up to the themes that occupy Dove in the book’s last section—the struggle of the poet, a poet who would reinterpret ancient myth to give meaning to her life and age. “When the ideas or forms we need are banished, we seek their residues wherever we can trace them,” says Adrienne Rich,<sup>32</sup> invoking one of the impulses Dove works from in *Mother Love*, seeking in the Demeter/Persephone myth and the sonnet form such residue for her own poetic project. In “Teotihuacan,” Dove ends the one stanza sonnet with an image that represents her understanding of the relationship between her poetic material—the myth, the sonnet form—and her position as poet using those materials: “The poets scribble in assorted notebooks. The guide moves on.”

In the poem, Dove invokes the Toltec deity Quetzacoatl—“Plumed serpent who reared his head in the east/his watery body everywhere” as “[t]he Indian guide explains...” how Aztec slaves decorated the temples (one of which is Quetzacoatl’s), using “an unassuming stalk which, chewed,/produced a showy green ( a younger stalk/made

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<sup>32</sup> “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet,” 174-5.

yellow)...” The myth of the Feathered Serpent says that he committed himself to flames in the Tabasco and Campeche regions of Mexico, the land of picture-writing in Toltec myth. In “Teotihuacan,” Dove writes a poem of pictures, of vivid images. The images are those of the Toltec painting materials and process, the images created out of those materials and that process no longer existent. The poet is writing pictures one might say, stealing from Toltec myth and creative forms, having come to the ancient civilization’s ruins seeking Rich’s residues of “ideas or forms...banished.” Dove knows she is working with residue, in this poem, in the whole of *Mother Love*. Left alone with the notes accumulated in studying ancient myth and forms, Dove knows the notes, the residue, are not the ideas or forms from which they issue. She looks for the meaning of her age and her experience in the notes accumulated before the guide to the poet moves on, and the poet goes home to her desk. In “Teotihuacan,” Dove scribbles in her notebook. The poem informed by Toltec myth and creative tradition is made. This is the last turn in the last sequence-large pattern of turns the book makes as it moves progressively from the first section to its last. Dove turns directly to the subject of poetry in the book’s last section.

Section VII, “Her Island,” is an extended crown of sonnets cycle<sup>33</sup>—a sequence conventionally comprised of seven Petrarchan sonnets, in which each sonnet after the first picks up the last line of the preceding as its first line, and the last line of the last sonnet is the first line of first sonnet. The last, and eleventh, sonnet in this extended-by-four crown of sonnets cycle, and the last of *Mother Love*, completes not only the crown of sonnet cycle but the conflation of eras, locations, and “mother-goddess, daughter-consort and poet” that has permeated the entire book’s sonnet sequence. It takes place on Sicily, where Dove and her husband are exploring the island, and its various mythic and historic sites, one of which is the site of Demeter’s temple, in the province of Enna, also the site of

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<sup>33</sup> It is also known as a crown of sonnet sequence, but in this discussion I will use cycle to distinguish it from the book as sonnet sequence. Cycle is perhaps a more precise term to use regarding the section in which Dove closes a book about the Greek myth that provided explanation of nature’s seasonal cycles.



Persephone's abduction in certain versions of the myth.<sup>34</sup> The poet has a guide, just as she did in "Teotihuacan." He is more involved in her story and in her poetry than the Indian guide of that poem. He is "a funny man" (68), "Quasimodo in a sunnier vein" (69). Dove is trying to disentangle herself from him by the third cycle sonnet. She wonders, "Isn't there a way to tip him early/and get the hell back to the car?" (70).

Despite her itching to rid herself of this "old man" (70), the guide of "Her Island" will prove worthy of Dove's exploration of the island, of her relationship to the story she's just told and is still telling. Now, the subject is the poetry and its making and its meaning. Demeter and Persephone are fleeting presences in two sonnets only, a few lines for each, although alluded to throughout the cycle. An accumulated pressure of their stories pulses into this sonnet cycle. In the opening sonnet of "Her Island" (67),

All the temples of Agrigento  
line up like a widow's extracted wisdom teeth:  
ocher-stained, proud remnants  
of the last sturdy thing about her.

The temples line up also like a grieving mother's "extracted wisdom teeth" for Dove as she goes "round and round" (76) the making of the poetry in *Mother Love*. Dove's exploration of the Persephone/Demeter myth is "extracted wisdom" she takes into her exploration of her poetic experience writing the book, as she searches Sicily's various ruins for the "chthonic" (68) site of the myth, and simultaneously searches for the chthonic site of the poetry. The guide shows Dove the sights, all the gathered notes of History—"everywhere temples, or pieces of them" (73); the "...patch of weeds sprouting six—no, seven—columns, their Doric reserve softened by weather" (72); the "chthonic grotto" (68) that proves "a disappointment, as everywhere site has been/so far" (70); the drive "straight through the city dump,/through rotten fruit and Tampax tubes" (72). It is through the dump that Dove is guided by him to a temple "overgrown,/lost to busy people" (71). This itself

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<sup>34</sup> Graves, 90, among others.

proves fruitful to Dove. The guide has “had the key for many years; they’ve all forgotten the ugly god, god of all that’s modern,” (72) whose ruins—those of the Doric columns “softened by weather/to tawny indifference”—are “lost to busy people.” So much material for Dove to work with here—the “tawny indifference” of the mythic realm, a realm so passionately engaged and explored by the twentieth-century poet and tourist; that which is “lost,” “forgotten,” now retrieved by Dove—these seven columns and their god; “the ugly god,” who Dove will not relinquish in her work, as she will not relinquish the fact that language can be used by an “ugly god,” as Trujillo proves in “Parsley” (*M* 75-77), as the white man’s entry on the Negro in the Werner Encyclopedia proves in some of Thomas’s poems in *Thomas and Beulah*.

The guide serves another function in this section. His gestures confirm that the crown of sonnets speaker is Dove and open the poetry up to its most direct treatment of the question of racial identity.<sup>35</sup> He brings the question of the relationship between the poet’s racial and sex identities and poetic tradition directly into the poetry. Dove tells us: “His touch trembles at my arm;/hasn’t he seen an American Black/before?” (69); and: “The way he stops to smile at me/and pat my arm, I’m surely his first/Queen of Sheba” (70). What is an American Black poet doing exploring ancient mythic traditions? is a question Dove has heard before. Here, she says, I am trying to get “the fragments” of *my* story to “join in me with their own music.” —As Muriel Rukeyser achieved in “The Poem as Mask,” her poem about Orpheus and her own poetic practices, from which this line is taken. There she throws off her poetic impulse to conflation with Orpheus, declaring “No more masks! No more mythologies!” For Rukeyser, the conflation is a “mask” for her condition as poet: “...split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself.”<sup>36</sup> Dove is not in exile from herself in

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<sup>35</sup> There is only one other poem in the book that speaks to black racial experience. In “Protection,” the reference is oblique. Demeter says, “I know I’m not saying this right../’Good’ hair has no body/in this country;/ like trained ivy,/it hangs and shines....”(11).

<sup>36</sup> In Gilbert and Gubar (1985) 1782-3.

relationship to Demeter. She is able to speak—Demeter is not a mask, Demeter informs me, she says in *Mother Love*. I am an American black woman writing my experience as this ancient myth informs it. She says too, to those who ask the question the guide asks: “No more masks! No more mythologies!” I am an American Black poet exploring ancient mythic traditions, conventional poetic forms.

In this sonnet, Dove has found that “nothing will come of this textbook rampaging, though we have found, by/stint and intuition, the “chthonic” (68) site. Here, knowledge, that which is found in textbooks, is acknowledged as an element of the poet’s search, as it was in “Teotihuacan” 68), where “[t]he poets scribble in assorted notebooks” (58). At the same time, it is abandoned for the greater rewards of “stint and intuition” in the poetic process. In “Teotihuacan,” where “the guide moves on,” as the last gesture of the poem, the poet is left with notes from the tour and the blank open space on the page that follows. In “Her Island, Dove finally comes to the chthonic site—(reservoir of the underside of human experience which so interests Dove and resonance of the myth she has worked with and followed through its “bliss of unfolding”)—through the mysteries of language yielded in this book length sonnet sequence, *Mother Love*.

“...[L]anguage will often help you by catching the subconscious off guard,” Dove tells William Walsh., discussing the poem “O”—which she characterizes as an *ars poetica* poem—in her first book, *Yellow House*.<sup>37</sup> There, in the last lines of the last poem in the book, “you start out with one thing, end/up with another, and nothing’s/like it used to be, not even the future.” Here, in the last poem—the crown of sonnets cycle—in her fifth book, she is nearing the end of a poetic project in which “even the future” is “nothing like it used to be,” before she makes her way through the poems that become *Mother Love*. Any future mindful telling of the Demeter/Persephone myth will be different than it would have been before Dove wrote this book. Now such telling will be informed by the permutations

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<sup>37</sup> Isn’t Reality Magic?” 150

of the myth enacted here by Dove, as *Mother Love* enters the *Linga-Sharira* of Western poetic discourse, constellating bits and pieces of Greek myth, contemporary American female folklore, the Renaissance sonnet form, various contemporary *ars poetica* discourse, and most assuredly, of *Thomas and Beulah*—the book that freed Dove to fly in whatever direction she wishes.

Dove goes on in her conversation with Walsh to identify “O” as a poem “...that signaled the end of an apprenticeship”.<sup>38</sup>

I was ready to begin. For a writer to recognize that the language is both  
your tool and your clay—that you work with and through it—is liberation,  
because there are a thousand different ways to get at the ineffable.<sup>39</sup>

One of those ways becomes, in *Mother Love*, four books later, working with and through the sonnet form “to get at the ineffable.” Having toured exhaustively the island and its historic sites and ruins, Dove finds, in the last sonnet in the cycle, that “no story’s ever finished; it just goes/on, unnoticed in the dark that’s all/around us: blazed stones, the ground closed.”

In Emily Dickinson’s poem, “The World is not Conclusion,” she speaks of the natural world, Nature, as apprehended by we humans. In the last sonnet in *Mother Love*, Dove speaks of the mythic world—its stories, its “everywhere temples, or pieces of them,” as apprehended and retold by a late twentieth-century poet. Both Dickinson and Dove come to “not Conclusion” regarding what can be read in Nature, in myth, respectively. For Dickinson, “The World is not Conclusion.” “[B]eyond” is something

Invisible, as Music—  
But positive, as Sound—  
It beckons, and it baffles—  
Philosophy—don’t know—

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<sup>38</sup> Recall that Dove characterizes the writing of *Thomas and Beulah* as an apprenticeship also. Indeed, Dove seems to be a poet of continual apprenticeship, each book of poetry she writes opening the way for something new to be explored in its successor.

<sup>39</sup> “Isn’t Reality Magic?” 150.

Finally:

And through a Riddle, at the last—  
Sagacity, must go.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, for Dove, “Where the chariot went under/no one can fathom,” and,

no story’s ever finished; it just goes  
on, unnoticed in the dark that’s all  
around us: blazed stones, the ground closed. (77)

The story of the myth will never be finished, as *Mother Love* attests to in Dove’s late twentieth-century retelling of it. The story of poetry—its *ars poetica* discourse—will never be finished. The story that follows Dove’s poetic practices will never be finished. Dove characterizes the poem “O” as signaling the end of an apprenticeship, and the writing of *Thomas and Beulah* as an apprenticeship. Indeed, Dove seems to be a poet of continual apprenticeship, each book of poetry she writes opening the way for something new to be explored in its successor. Here, at the end of *Mother Love*, at the end of the crown of sonnets cycle, wherein she has explored her own process writing it, she appears once again to signal the end of an apprenticeship, another completion through “stint and intuition.”

The poet and her husband “circle the island, trailing the sun/...turning time back/to one infernal story” (74), a counterclockwise movement. Dove has spent the entire sonnet sequence circling the “one infernal story,” her story. She has done so in part by “turning time back” to the Demeter/Persephone myth. She has also done so in reinterpretation for the twentieth century. The poet may circle the island searching for the ancient stories, but she does so driving an American model rental car in the midst of modern Sicilian traffic. Here are the opening lines of an “Her Island” sonnet:

Traffic whizzes by in heaven  
for the Sicilians, of that we’re certain  
why else are they practicing on earth, hell-bent  
to overtake creampuff foreigners in their rented  
Chrysler? Ha! Can’t they guess a German  
plies the wheel? (73)

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<sup>40</sup> *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* 501.

This is one of the fragments of Dove's story, the cosmopolitan traveler midst the reckless, "hell-bent" Sicilians holding her own. Another is the "monstrous broken sticks, flung/aside in a celestial bout of I Ching" (74). These are the fragments of the Greek temples she sees "everywhere" as she circles and explores "Her Island." "[E]verywhere temples, or pieces of them" is the last line of the sonnet beginning "Traffic whizzes by in heaven" (73) and the first line of the succeeding sonnet in which Dove and her husband drive the circumference of Sicily, "trailing the sun" and searching for the mythic lake, into which "...a girl/[was] pulled..." (74). The line is part of the connective poetic material throughout the book that allows Dove to achieve the gesture that Rukeyser does at the end of "The Poem as Mask." Dove's difference from Rukeyser is that she enters the poem without a mask, without the inhibition Rukeyser has to overthrow in her Orpheus poem, and "the fragments join in me with their own music," as the bliss of unfolding in language has proven to her before. In this book, the fragments, the residue, of ancient myth and traditional poetic convention conjoin with Dove in her singing her late twentieth century American song.

Dove acknowledges in her interview with Bellin that Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* were the inspiration in part for her sonnets to Demeter and Persephone, believing before her daughter Aviva apprised her otherwise, that "...I had chosen Demeter because of Rilke's Orpheus" (23). She does not mention Persephone, yet in *Mother Love* Persephone follows from Demeter, as Beulah followed from Thomas in *Thomas and Beulah*. And just as poet Dove follows grandparents Thomas and Beulah, poet—one of the figures in the triad "struggling to sing in their chains" (xii)—follows from Demeter and Persephone. Rilke says of Orpheus the singer, "you built temples for them in their hearing."<sup>41</sup> Demeter and Persephone build temples for Dove in her hearing.

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<sup>41</sup> Sonnet 1 (17).

Rilke describes what Orpheus does in music: “The lyre’s lattice does not snare his hands./And he obeys, while yet he oversteps.”<sup>42</sup> Surely an apt description of what Rita Dove does in *Mother Love*. Neither the structure of the sonnet form nor the framework of the Demeter/Persephone myth impede Dove’s contemporary reworking of them. Dove follows the conventions of the sonnet form and the myth at the same time that she oversteps them, providing her own particular reinterpretations that speak to her individual experience and that of her age. The “fragments” of the old and the new, the conventional and the Dovian, “join in [Dove] with their own music”—*Mother Love*.

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<sup>42</sup> Sonnet 5 (25).

## CONCLUSION

...the professor came up to me and said, "we're going to figure out how you do it!" And I thought, who cares? The whole idea was so pigheaded and neurotic, there was nothing to say, really. As if anyone could pin any of this down.

Rita Dove, 1993 (Describing her reaction to a colleague's reading of one of his graduate students' reports (based on an interview with Dove) on Dove's "Theories of Composition.")

In Ekaterini Georgoudaki's essay reviewing the first four of Rita Dove's books of poetry, she identifies the concerns and "dilemmas" Dove deals with, placing her along a historical continuum of "previous Afro-American women poets." They are:

...feelings of displacement, fragmentation, and isolation, and [the] distaste for conventional stereotypes, hierarchies, divisions and boundaries; ...[the] search for wholeness, balance, connection, continuity, reconciliation with the self and the world, as well as efforts to redefine the self and history, and to renew cultural values. (419)

This is a succinct and lucid overview of Dove's work in all five volumes considered in this study. It is also an apt description of the position from which all American poets write, Dove would say, and I would agree. After all, Dove says that the experience of "Difference" Claude McKay calls "the dark delight of being strange,/the penalty of difference in the crowd,/the loneliness of wisdom among fools" is not just a black racial experience but the writer's experience, "particularly in this country," where a writer "grow[s] up feeling 'strange,'" and experiences not only alienation but the "secret delights in this Apartness."<sup>1</sup> Dove has a position within myriad strands of American poetic discourse, including black American women's, African-American, and American women's poetic and literary traditions. Those are not, however, the only strands of American poetic

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<sup>1</sup> Hammer and Daub 34.



discourse within which Dove is situated. Her participation within various formalist traditions is too often overlooked in readings of her poetry, although many critics and scholars who read her acknowledge Dove's virtuosity in various formal poetic practices.

As an American poet who is black and female, Rita Dove experiences not only the "secret delights" of a poet's "Apartness," but also the "penalty of difference in the crowd" of American poetic discourse and the "penalty of difference in the crowd" of American society and culture, which, as Dove herself says, inform her poetry in various ways. But as categories, black, female, and black female do not adhere as description of her as poet. Rita Dove is a quintessential and wholly American poet. She participates in the broad ranging, multiplicitous, unruly "chatter" (to borrow her term in the poem "In the Old Neighborhood")—the poet-chatter—that all American poets, no matter their identity in terms of gender or race, have been participating in with vigor and dialectic interaction since poets in the new country began to separate from the literary parentage of England, the old country.

In the introduction to this study, I noted that from its inception, American poetic discourse has involved a consideration of poetry that links formal issues and issues of content, of "meaning"—for American poets, form is central to an American poetic expression. For Bradstreet, Whitman, Pound, Tolson, Levertov, and scores of others who also could have been brought into this study in relationship to Dove, this is paramount. (One can add after reading Rita Dove's opus, that this is also paramount for Thomas and Beulah.) When Dove says, "Language is everything," she joins a long established line of poets for whom this is true. In her poetry she provides her own particular representation of how this is so.

In Louise Glück's introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1993*, she provides a definition of poetry which I find most applicable to readings of Dove's poetry:

Poems *are* autobiography, but divested of the trappings of chronology and comment, the metronome alternation of anecdote and response. Moreover, a

body of work may change and develop less in reaction to the lived life than in reaction to the poet's prior discoveries, or the discoveries of others.<sup>2</sup>

As is true for all poets, Dove's poetic opus is a poet's autobiography, and one informed by her prior discoveries, as well as the discoveries of other poets come before her in American tradition and those writing contemporaneously to her. In 1994, William Walsh speaks to this in his comments on the "monumental" transformations a word precipitates in "O," the last poem in *The Yellow House on the Corner*: "It's that moving forward that seems to me from [the book] that moves you forward as an artist, moves the book forward." Dove replies:

Yes. Yes. And it's the last poem in the book for that reason, too, a way of saying, "Let's leave this behind. Let's go on. Now we can begin." I felt that way about [the book]. "O" was the last poem written for that book, which like many first books is a hodgepodge of techniques and visions, with poems that evolved over an extended period as I learned to write and use my voice. By the time I actually began to assemble the manuscript, I thought the book was finished, and then that last poem was written. "O" felt like a very different kind of poem, one that signaled the end of an apprenticeship. I was ready to begin. For a writer to recognize that the language is both your tool and your clay—that you work with and through it—is liberation, because there a thousand different ways to get at the ineffable. To figure out what you're really writing about is extremely difficult to do by direct attack; you can end up destroying yourself in the process. But the language will often help you by catching the subconscious off guard. So that poem was, for me, an *ars poetica* at the time. Still is, really. (150)

When Dove moves on from *Yellow House*'s hodgepodge of techniques and visions (encompassing a broad range of approaches attentive to the most elemental aspects of poetic language, such as sound and line length, and even punctuation, witness the leaping commas of "Nexus"; and an equally broad range of disparate (Schumann and Solomon Northrup for example) individuals' experiences, most of them Dovian "nobodies"), she moves forward into an ever deepening engagement with various of the elements laid out in the "hodgepodge" of poems in that book. She follows the "bliss of unfolding" through and in language that leads to "O" in *Yellow House*, through all the poems written before in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Proofs and Theories* 92.

book to “O.” In her first book, following the “bliss of unfolding” leads her to the discovery of the rightness, the suitability, of that working through and in language, for her as poet. The very last lines of her first book, the very last lines of “O,” are about how “[o]ne word of Swedish has changed the whole neighborhood.” They are:

You start out with one thing, end  
up with another, and nothing’s  
like it used to be, not even the future. (71)

Dove starts out with *Yellow House* in 1980, and ends up with *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* in 1999, and “nothing’s like it used to be, not even the future,” of her own poetry and that of the American poetic discourse her poetry participates in, amplifies, and transforms in various ways.

The “bliss of unfolding” that produces *Yellow House* leads next for Dove to *Museum*. Here she continues to write poetry asserting her place within various American poetic discourses, enacting an affirmative response to the proscriptions she rejects in “Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, In a Dream,” one which proclaims a relationship to all of Culture and History, including H.D., a poet seemingly so far from the influences and traditions with which Dove is most often associated in discussions of her work. Here she furthers what she started out with in *Yellow House*, the equal valuing of the “small people” and the canonized of History (represented in the inclusion of a poem on Schumann in a volume devoted primarily to “nobodies”), devoting one section of this book which focuses on artifacts and cultural and historical figures entered into Western culture to her father. In *Museum* she continues to bring autobiographical elements into her poetry, as she did in *Yellow House*. Here the family continues to be poetic material. When Fiammetta comes to voice regarding her relationship to Boccaccio, she does so addressing her mother. The source of the dictator Trujillo’s brutality is his mother loss. From the “hodgepodge” of formal techniques enacted in the poetry of her first book, Dove moves in her second book to exploration of the uses of traditional poetic forms, most provocatively that of the sestina and the villanelle. Her choice in *Museum* of various creative figures, such as Boccaccio,

Holderlin, Shakespeare and Champion Jack Dupree, signals her continued meditation on creative acts, expressed in *Yellow House* through such poems as “Nigger Song: An Odyssey” and “A Suite for Augustus.”

Again, in Dove’s third book, the poetry emerges out of Dove’s following poetry’s “bliss of unfolding” in language. The family becomes poetic subject and source material in *Thomas and Beulah*. Autobiography becomes poetic progeniture. The relationship between History and the ordinary individual’s experience of it, a theme in both *Yellow House* and *Museum*, is most fully explored in *Thomas and Beulah* of all Dove’s volumes of poetry. Dove’s meditations on the uses of language, enacted in such *Yellow House* poems as “Nexus” and “Parsley,” are further amplified in many of Thomas’s and Beulah’s poems, wherein Dove explores Thomas’s and Beulah’s creative acts and enacts them in her own poetic practices. The enactment of a “sustained sequence” of poems, which Dove characterizes *Thomas and Beulah* as, is clearly the unfolding beginning in Dove’s poetic practices that will lead her two books later to the sonnet sequence of *Mother Love*. Dove herself says that the writing of *Thomas and Beulah* precipitated the poems in her next book, *Grace Notes*. Here the representation of direct individual experience that all of her poems in prior books constitute becomes most personally autobiographical, in poems of Dove’s experience as mother, daughter, professor, black woman, black mother of “cream child.” The exploration of how the grid-like construct of History informs individual lives begun in *Yellow House* now finds enactment in such poems as “The Island Women of Paris,” “Canary,” and “Summit Beach, 1921.” Beulah’s “Summit Beach,” with its grace note Thomas presence, begets all of the poems in the book, sounding an affirmative appoggiatura note that leans on them, informs them, and provides Dove the bliss of unfolding to the island women in Paris and Billie Holiday from the “gold” Beulah is in the poem. The grace note metaphor of the book sounds the inextricable relationship for Dove between subject matter—individual experience of History, and form—the grace note; and

the centrality for Dove of the musical qualities sounded out in the “bliss of unfolding” in language.

*Mother Love*, Dove’s fifth book of poetry, most perfectly of these five, enacts the form and yield of Dovian “bliss of unfolding.” Each sonnet and each section in the book becomes the direct unfolding of the poem or section before it, formally and thematically. The book’s final section, the extended crown of sonnets cycle, brings this unfolding enactment full circle, within itself, and within all of Dove’s poetry come before it, and out of which it is precipitated. This sonnet sequence book is Dove’s most wholly formed formal enactment of the “bliss of unfolding.” The H.D.esque stealing and plundering Dove began in *Yellow House* finds full measure here. The poet “struggling to sing in [her] chains” of the sonnet form wills herself to the struggle through her belief, strengthened in each successive book she writes through to this one, that the struggle in language will yield the bliss of unfolding and its discoveries. Dove the poet steals and plunders from ancient Greek myth and discovers both her mother self and her poet self imbricated in the poetry enacted out of that stealing and plundering. The folkloric and mythic expressions Dove first explored in *Yellow House* in such poems as “The Snow King,” “Beauty and the Beast,” and “The Bird Frau” find full poetic animation in *Mother Love*.

The “bliss of unfolding” in and through language yields ever richer territory as it becomes progressively enacted throughout Rita Dove’s poetic opus. At the end of *Mother Love*, the poet drives around and around the island of Sicily in her “rented/Chrysler”; driving “through the city dump,/through rotten fruit and Tampax tubes,” circling in search of “one infernal story” (74), that of the myth, that of the mother-daughter relationship Dove says is hers with her daughter, and that of the poet’s relationship to poetry. In the last lines of the eleven sonnet section, the poet discovers, “no story’s ever finished; it just goes on”—and on, I believe Dove’s readers must hope. A reader may never be able to figure out how she does it, but the “bliss of unfolding” of this poet’s exploration of poetry and her relationship to it keeps turning up ever more enrichments of American poetic tradition.

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